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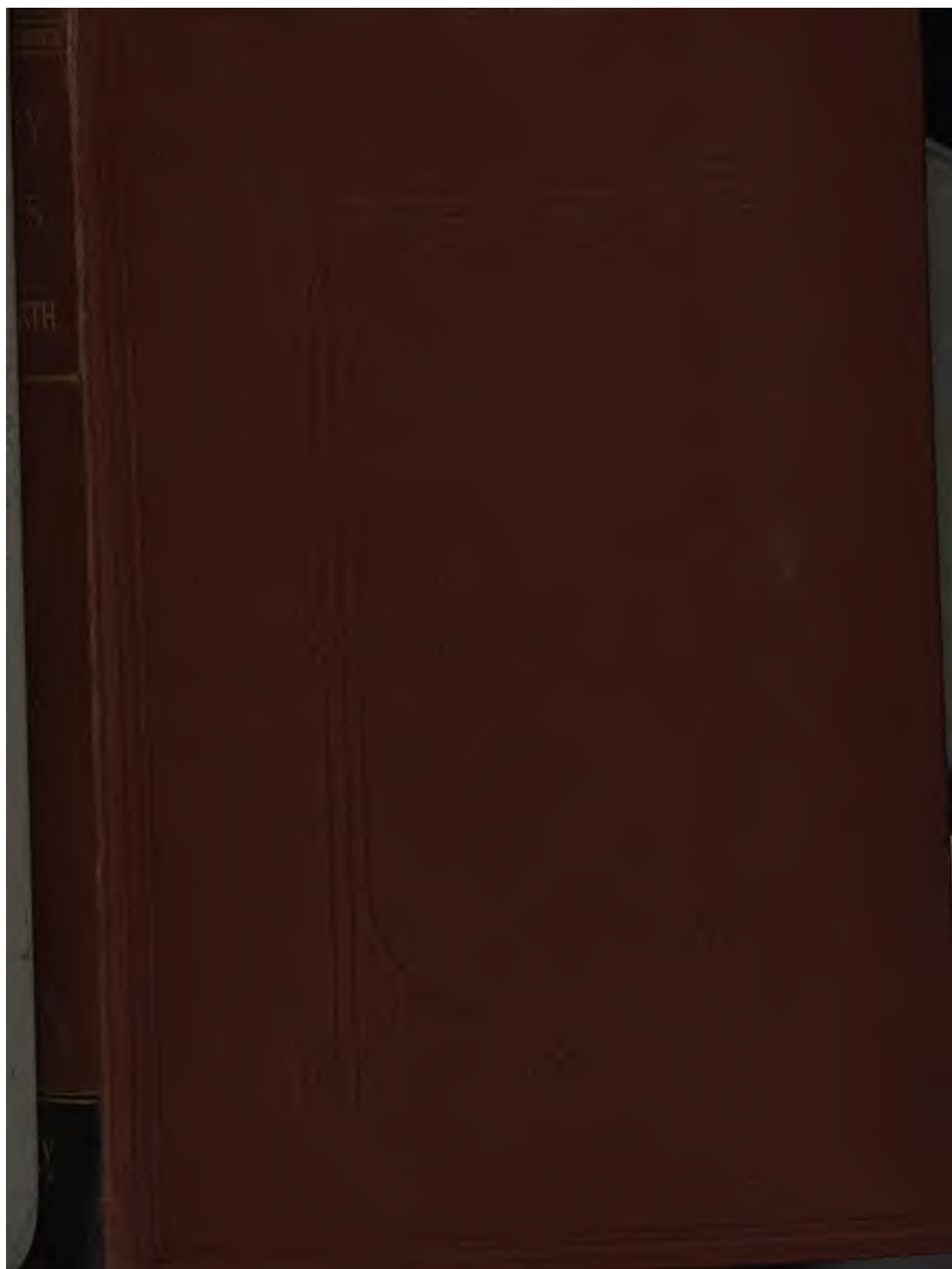
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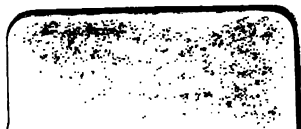
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HILARY ST. IVES.

A Novel.

BY

WILLIAM HARRISON AINSWORTH.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. III.



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Hilary St. Ives.

BOOK II.

(Continued.)

MYRTILLA.

L

XXI.

EXPLAINS THE COLONEL'S ERRAND.

NEXT day, Colonel Delacombe went down to Hazlemere, as appointed.

He did not arrive till the afternoon, and all the party, except the lady of the house, had gone over to Boxgrove. Immediately on his arrival, he inquired for the housekeeper, stating that he had something to say to her, and Mr. Luff conducted him to her room.

Mrs. Sutton, who was engaged at the time on some household matters, received him with all

the deference consistent with her station, so long as the butler was present, but as soon as they were alone, her manner changed, and with a menacing look she demanded what brought him again to Hazlemere.

"My errand, as I think you might guess, is to see you," he replied, seating himself. "A good deal has happened lately."

"Yes, your designs upon Lady Richborough have been frustrated," she rejoined, with a bitter smile; "and if you have any designs here they will likewise be frustrated."

"Before you make any further observations, which only serve to display your malignity, it may be as well to inform you that I saw Mr. Courtenay yesterday."

The housekeeper turned very pale. He remarked the effect produced upon her.

"Perhaps you will talk a little more rationally now," he said.

"I care nothing for Mr. Courtenay," she cried, recovering herself. "He can tell you nothing that you did not know before."

"Pardon me. He gave me some particulars of your history with which I was wholly unacquainted. Hitherto," he continued, in a stern tone, "I believed that your unhappy mother died of a broken heart. I now know——"

"It is false," she interrupted, fiercely. "Mr. Courtenay is my deadly enemy, and would destroy me if he could. You do not believe me capable of such a deed as that with which he charges me?"

"I will not pronounce an opinion," said the colonel, still more sternly. "I would fain hope you are innocent of this foul and unnatural crime; but after what I have heard, I can scarcely acquit you."

"I am innocent," cried the wretched woman. "As I hope for mercy hereafter, I am innocent

of this dreadful offence! Say you believe me, Seymour!—say you believe me!”

“Do not touch me, woman!” he cried, pushing her from him, with an expression of loathing.

“Oh! Heaven support me!” she cried, sinking into a chair with a look of agony.

“If I did my duty,” he said, after a pause, “I should bring you to justice; but I am restrained by considerations which you will understand.”

“Considerations for yourself,” she cried, with a vindictive look. “You would not spare me, if your own reputation were not at stake.”

“I spare you for your son’s sake as well as my own,” he rejoined. “The stings of an accusing conscience, which you cannot stifle, will be punishment enough for you.”

“Do not condemn me unheard,” she cried, rousing herself, and speaking with impassioned earnestness. “You have lent a too ready ear to

this charge. It cannot be substantiated. I can show you Mr. Courtenay's motives for making it."

"I do not desire to hear them," he said. "Your own conduct condemns you: your quarrels with your unhappy mother, and her death, under suspicious circumstances, seem to fix the crime on you. But evidences of guilt are afforded by your flight with your paramour—by your desertion of your child—by the device adopted to screen yourself from the consequences of your evil deeds. If innocent, why allow it to be supposed that you had perished in the Severn? Why conceal your existence? Why hide yourself under a feigned name? If innocent, why are you here—as Mrs. Sutton? Your conduct proclaims your guilt."

"It may seem to do so—but I was driven to act as I did by remorse—not for the crime which you believe me to have committed, and of which,

as Heaven knows ! I am innocent—but for other offences. I knew I should be shunned and despised, and wished to be forgotten. I found, as I deemed, a secure retreat, and remained in it unmolested for years—and might have remained in it to the end, if you—to whom I owe all my affliction—had not appeared to trouble me. I am not so bad as you suppose. I have sinned deeply, but have repented. I would willingly—if I could—have made some atonement for my errors. I might have died in peace—unknown and respected. Of all men, I would most have avoided you, Seymour Delacombe. But fate has brought you hither to perplex me—to rouse evils passions in my breast, and prompt evil actions. I warned you not to come. I besought you not to meddle with me. You would not heed ; and if ill ensues, you will be responsible for it.”

“It is useless to continue this discussion,”

observed the colonel, entirely unmoved by her defence. "I have simply to tell you that you cannot remain longer here."

"You tell me so?" she said, in a singular tone, in which a latent menace could be detected. "What if I refuse to go on your bidding?"

"You will not refuse, when I tell you that by remaining here you will mar your son's prospects."

"Do you mean to acknowledge him?"

"Not till you are gone."

A fierce conflict took place in the unhappy woman's bosom. Vindictive feelings obtained the mastery. Infernal malice blazed in her eyes as she spoke.

"My son is nothing to me," she cried. "He is devoid of natural feeling. When he was here the other day, he drove me mad by his utter insensibility. If he loved me, I would make any

sacrifice for him. I would lay down my life to serve him. But he hates me, and thinks only of the detestable woman who has robbed me of his affections. I will stay to plague *her*."

"Have you no good feeling left?"

"When my lacerated heart is healed, it will be time to talk to me of good feelings," she rejoined. "Meanwhile, I stay here. Try to remove me at your peril."

"You shall go, be the consequences what they may," cried the colonel.

And he arose and left the room.

Ascertaining from Boston that Mrs. Radcliffe was in her boudoir, he proceeded thither at once.

"That infernal woman is capable of anything," he thought, as he went up-stairs.

He was right, and he would have comprehended her vindictive purpose, if he had seen her take a

letter from a private drawer, and heard her
mutter,

“It is well I secured this letter. The time is
come to use it.”

XXII.

THE USE MADE OF THE LETTER.

ARMED with this letter, Mrs. Sutton left her room. She knew where the colonel was gone, and was about to follow him, when she encountered Mr. Radcliffe in the hall. He had just returned from Boxgrove, having ridden on by himself. Struck by the housekeeper's haggard looks, he inquired what was the matter.

"I have something to say to you, sir—something important—in private," she rejoined.

"Well, come with me to my study. We shan't be disturbed there. Colonel Delacombe, I hear, has arrived."

“Yes; he is with Mrs. Radcliffe—in her boudoir,” she replied, significantly.

“Nothing strange in that,” observed the worthy gentleman.

The housekeeper accompanied him to his study—a comfortable little room adjoining the library, in which he transacted his magisterial business. It was furnished with a large writing-table, on which sundry law-books were laid, together with files of papers. Seating himself near this table, he requested the housekeeper to take a chair beside him.

“By-the-by, Sutton, have you heard the news?” he remarked. “Colonel Delacombe, I’m told, is about to adopt that young artist, who came here—Hilary St. Ives. Odd! ain’t it?”

“It may appear odd to you, sir, but it doesn’t surprise me. Ah! sir, you little know——”

“Little know what?” he cried. “Speak plainly. Why do you look at me in that manner?”

"Because I'm so sorry for you, sir. My heart bleeds for you. But it must out—it must out."

"What must out?" he demanded.

"The dreadful secret," she rejoined. "I can keep it no longer. Prepare yourself for a great shock, sir. You will need all your firmness."

Mr. Radcliffe's looks betokened great trouble, but the relentless woman went on.

"Read that," she said, placing the letter before him. "That will tell you all. That will show you how you have been deceived."

Damps gathered upon the poor gentleman's brow, and his vision grew dim.

"I would rather not read it, Sutton," he said, in a husky, unnatural voice, pushing the letter from him as he spoke. "I don't want to learn anything that will give me pain. I would rather rest in ignorance."

This did not suit her.

"You *will* read the letter, sir," she said, "when I tell you that it is from the young man you have just mentioned — Hilary St. Ives—to *his mother*."

"To his mother, did you say? Why, it is addressed to my wife," he cried, snatching up the letter to examine it.

"Your wife is his mother," said Mrs. Sutton, in a hollow voice.

"You lie, woman!" cried Mr. Radcliffe, springing up, and striking the table with his clenched hand. "You lie! How dare you make such an abominable insinuation? Quit my presence instantly! Quit the house! Begone!"

"I am ready to go at once," she rejoined, rising. "But you will repent the language you have used towards me. My feelings would not allow me to conceal the truth."

"Stay!" he cried. "I am half distracted. You must make allowances for me, Sutton."

"I make every allowance for you, sir. I pity you from the bottom of my heart."

He sat down. His hand shook so much that he could scarcely hold the letter, but he went on, pausing every now and then to wipe the damps from his brow.

At last the letter dropped upon the table.

The mischief was done.

"You have destroyed my peace for ever, Sutton," groaned the miserable man, after a pause; "but I forgive you. What a cruel deception has been practised upon me! How I doted upon her!"

"Had you no previous suspicions, sir?"

"Suspicious?—no! I had the most perfect faith in her. I believed every word she told me—every word. I knew that an engagement had subsisted between her and Seymour Delacombe—I knew that she nourished a silly, sentimental

regard for him—but the idea of anything wrong never entered my head. Even now—with this frightful evidence before me—I can scarcely believe it.”

“I thought her conduct towards the young man might have surprised you, sir.”

“It did surprise me. I disapproved of her absurd demonstrations of regard for him, though I took no notice of them. But they bear a different construction now. What am I to do, Sutton? What am I to do?”

“Act like a man, sir. Under such circumstances, there is but one course to pursue.”

“But I have not the heart to cast her from me, as you would seem to suggest. Besides,” he cried, with a sudden access of tenderness, “she is the mother of my child. For May’s sake I must endure the wrong patiently and in silence.”

“For your own sake you cannot allow things

to continue as they are. The colonel must not remain here."

"He shall not," cried the deluded man, transported with fury. "He is in the boudoir, you say, with my wife. I am half inclined to blow out his brains."

"He richly deserves it, but it will be enough if you order him out of the house."

"I'll go to them at once. I will not allow my just indignation to cool," he cried, rushing out of his study, and hurrying up-stairs to the boudoir.

"They will now feel my power," cried Mrs. Sutton, with an exulting smile.

XXIII.

AN ILL QUARTER OF AN HOUR.

MR. RADCLIFFE'S wild looks and abrupt entrance were well calculated to alarm his wife and the colonel, who were engaged at the moment in an anxious discussion relative to Mrs. Sutton—the colonel urging her immediate dismissal, and the lady reluctant to yield assent. They guessed what had happened, and prepared for a storm.

Without vouchsafing a word, and scarcely appearing to notice them, the incensed gentleman marched straight to the fireplace, and taking

down the two miniatures, which had been restored to their places, smashed them with the poker, and flung the fragments into the grate.

"There!" he roared. "Those accursed objects will never more offend my sight."

He then turned round, and glared at the astonished witnesses of his proceeding, who, while his back was towards them, had exchanged very expressive glances and gestures.

"Have you taken leave of your senses, Mr. Radcliffe?" inquired his wife, eyeing him through her glass, and speaking with a calmness that aggravated his fury.

"Perhaps I have," he vociferated, almost foaming at the mouth with rage. "I have enough to make me mad. I have long been your dupe, madam, but at last my eyes are opened, and I clearly discern the position in which you have placed me by your perfidious conduct. I have read the letter of—of"—the words well-nigh

suffocated him, but at last he got them out—
“of your SON! Here it is, madam. Look at it!
Can you deny that this letter is addressed to
you?”

“No, I do not attempt to deny it,” she replied,
calmly.

“Then you glory in your shame! You
unblushingly avow that you have deceived me
—ha!”

“When you speak more temperately, Mr. Radcliffe—in a manner more befitting our relations towards each other—I will answer you; but thus addressed, I shall not condescend to do so.”

“You take it with a very high hand, madam,”
he sneered; “but it won’t answer your purpose.
I am not to be imposed upon.”

“My good Mr. Radcliffe,” said the colonel,
“you are entirely under a delusion.”

“A delusion!” exclaimed the other, exasperated
beyond all bounds by the remark. “Do you

mean to tell me that I am to doubt the evidence of my own senses? I have here in this dam-natory letter proof positive of my unhappy wife's criminality."

"My criminality, Mr. Radcliffe! I will not allow such language to be used to me."

"You will regret your violence, sir, when you are able to view the matter in its proper light," observed the colonel. "If you will only hear me——"

"Explanations will not avail with me, sir. It will be idle, therefore, to attempt them."

Then with a withering look at his wife, he cried, "You forget, madam, that in this very room, where you are now sitting, I beheld your son at your feet. I heard you address him with all a mother's tenderness."

"I believed him to be the colonel's son," she rejoined.

"I don't doubt it," cried her husband, bitterly.
"You had good reasons for the belief."

"Mr. Radcliffe," said Colonel Delacombe, sternly, "this must proceed no further. You are merely an instrument in the hands of a malignant and vindictive woman, who, for purposes of her own—which, if I deemed proper, I could easily explain—seeks to injure me and destroy your wife's reputation. How came that letter, from which you have drawn these erroneous conclusions, in Mrs. Sutton's possession?"

"I never gave it her," said Mrs. Radcliffe.

"It must have been stolen to serve the infamous purpose for which it has been used," said the colonel. "Call Mrs. Sutton. I engage to unmask her villany."

Mrs. Radcliffe was about to ring the bell, but her husband authoritatively forbade her.

"I won't have her called," he said. "I won't

have a scene made. I am quite satisfied with her conduct. She has done her duty to me."

"She is a perfidious wretch," cried Mrs. Radcliffe. "Is this her return for all the kindness I have shown her!"

"A more atrocious scheme was never planned," said the colonel. "I will show you the motives of her conduct——"

"I am perfectly satisfied with her motives," rejoined Mr. Radcliffe, coldly.

"But you are labouring under an entire misapprehension, sir. Again, I request that the woman may be summoned."

"It will answer no purpose," rejoined Mr. Radcliffe, shaking his head. "Recriminations won't convince me."

"You are a barbarian," cried his wife—"a perfect barbarian!"

"You have made me what I am, madam," he rejoined.

I protest my innocence, sir !—protest it in the strongest terms. Will you believe me now ?”

“Proofs are against you, madam—incontestable proofs.”

“Oh ! this is too much,” she cried, sinking back. “I shall never survive it.”

“I must ring for assistance, sir,” said the colonel.

“Leave her alone,” interposed Mr. Radcliffe. “She has a smelling-bottle near her, if she wants it.”

Hearing this, his wife sprang up in the greatest indignation.

“I have just said you are a barbarian, Mr. Radcliffe,” she cried ; “and I now say you are a brute. Would you allow me to expire before your eyes ?”

“I am not afraid of your dying. Keep quiet and listen to me. This frightful secret has only just been revealed to me, and the agitation it has

caused has not allowed me to consider how I shall act. But I shall do nothing harshly. Though you have deeply wronged me I will not expose you to the contumely of the world. Your worthy father's later years shall not be embittered by the knowledge of your guilt. Your daughter"—and his voice faltered—"your daughter shall never learn it. Not for worlds would I have her know it."

"For mercy's sake, Mr. Radcliffe, do not go on thus. I am your faithful, loving wife."

And she tried to approach him, but he gently repulsed her.

"Had I known your true character, Esther, you would never have been my wife. For our child's sake I will bear with you. But never again will you be to me what you have been."

She gazed at him as if doubting what he said, but reading inflexibility in his looks, she uttered

an hysterical cry, and would have fallen if he had not caught her.

This was no pretended faintness, and scarcely knowing what he was about, Mr. Radcliffe rang the bell violently, while the colonel bathed the poor lady's temples with eau-de-Cologne, and gave her the flacon of salts to smell at.

"Sad work!" he observed to Mr. Radcliffe; "and to think that all this needless misery has been caused by that accursed woman. Ah! here she is," he exclaimed, as the door was opened. "Now for it!"

But she did not come alone. May was with her, and on seeing his daughter, Mr. Radcliffe whispered to the colonel:

"Not a word before her, sir, I insist."

The hypocritical housekeeper flew to her mistress, and, feigning the greatest concern at her condition, quickly relieved Mr. Radcliffe of

his burden, and placing the lady in her easy-chair, proceeded to apply fresh restoratives.

May was not so much alarmed as she would have been, had these fainting-fits been of less frequent occurrence. Nevertheless, she held one of her mother's hands in her own, and looked on anxiously.

"What has caused this, papa?" she asked.

"I can scarcely tell," he replied. "Your mamma is subject to these attacks, you know."

Mrs. Radcliffe at this moment began to recover her consciousness. On opening her eyes, and perceiving Mrs. Sutton near her, she pushed her off with signs of the greatest aversion.

But a gesture from Mr. Radcliffe prevented her from giving utterance to her anger.

"I have only waited for Mrs. Radcliffe's recovery to take my leave," said the colonel. "Pray make my adieux."

"You are not going," said the lady, slightly raising herself. "You are not obliged to return to town at once."

"Not exactly obliged, but——"

"Then, pray, stay."

"Yes, pray do, colonel," urged May. "Sir Charles quite calculates on meeting you at dinner."

"Well, I won't disappoint him. I will stay with the greatest pleasure."

"Very glad to hear it," cried Mr. Radcliffe, with affected heartiness.

Mrs. Sutton could scarcely conceal her mortification at this unexpected turn of affairs.

XXIV.

THE WARNING.

THINGS were now in a most unfortunate position. Without explaining his connection with Mrs. Sutton—without detailing his early history, which he could not persuade himself to do—Colonel Delacombe was unable to remove the baneful impression produced upon Mr. Radcliffe by Hilary's letter. Indeed the poor gentleman absolutely refused to listen to any further explanation. The colonel therefore was compelled


to desist, and allow things to remain as they were for the present.

Luckily there was a numerous dinner-party that day, and this offered some distraction. Mr. Radcliffe had to attend to his guests, and his thoughts were forcibly turned into other channels. As he gazed on his beloved child, who was seated next Sir Charles, and saw how bright and happy she looked, could he bring a shade upon that lovely brow? No, she must never learn his griefs. Mrs. Radcliffe put on a gay mask. Angry with her husband—angry with the colonel—excessively angry with Mrs. Sutton—she felt the necessity of keeping up appearances, and tried to look lively and unconcerned.

The dinner-party was exceedingly pleasant, and numbered half a dozen out of the eight charming girls chosen to act as bridesmaids at the approaching ceremonial. An equal number

of young men had been invited, so there was plenty of animated conversation, and possibly some little flirting. Bridesmaids expect to become brides in their turn, and all these were so pretty, that it seemed likely their expectations would be realised. Our inflammable friend Oswald was struck with a sudden admiration of the golden tresses and delicately fair complexion of Jessie Brooke, and paid her great attention. He was a sad fellow, that Oswald, and his grandsire did not know what to make of him. If the colonel was ill at ease as well as his host, no one found it out. He chanced to sit next to the vicar of Wootton, who had a very important part to play at the ceremony, and delighted the reverend gentleman with his conversation.

After dinner, there was music and a little carpet-dance for the young folks, in which both May and her lover took part, for though Sir



Charles, as we know, disliked balls, he did not object to a quiet quadrille. Never had he passed a happier evening, and he told May, as he bade her adieu for the night, that he hoped they should pass many—many such. Two days only intervened between them and the consummation of their happiness. On the third day May would become Lady Ilminster, and Sir Charles would be blessed—so he thought—with the fairest bride in England. All looked bright—too bright, perhaps, to last. But they had no misgivings. Possessing everything that can contribute to human felicity, they had every reasonable expectation of a long term of uninterrupted bliss.

They parted overnight, as we have described, Sir Charles assuring his intended bride, as he pressed her hand, that he had never been so happy as on that night, and she echoing the sentiment.

They met next morning, as arranged. The whole party had driven over to Boxgrove. Though Sir Charles did his best to conceal it, it was evident that he had something on his mind, but May forbore to question him till they were alone. She lured him out into the park, and as they shaped their course towards a grove his gloom increased—so much so that she began to feel quite uncomfortable. At last they sat down beneath a large oak, whose broad arms completely sheltered them from the sun. Then looking earnestly and entreatingly into his face, she besought him to tell her what was the matter.

“I have a presentiment of misfortune which I cannot shake off,” he replied, with a sad smile. “I have had a warning.”

The tone in which he pronounced the words made her blood run cold.

"A warning!" she echoed.

"Were you never told that we have a singular superstition?" he rejoined. "It is believed that each member of our family is warned of approaching death."

"You are saying this to frighten me, Charlie," said May, trying to force a smile, but unable to repress a shudder.

"Indeed I am not," he rejoined. "The warning is a matter of faith with all of us. There are too many instances on record to allow of any doubt."

"You never mentioned this to me before, Charlie."

"I wish I had not mentioned it now, for I have banished the roses from your cheeks. However, I must tell you all, since I have begun. My ancestor Sir Alberic was accidentally poisoned by his physician, and it is supposed that

the warning is given by the troubled spirit of this man. Be this as it may, it is certain that a dark shadowy figure is seen before any of our family dies at Boxgrove. This I myself can attest. On the night before the death of my father, Sir Umfraville, I beheld the shadow."

May uttered an exclamation of mingled astonishment and horror.

"He was ill at the time, but not thought to be in danger," he continued. "I was proceeding along the corridor towards his room, when I saw a dark figure pass through the door. But I had no uneasiness, for I thought it was one of the servants. When I entered, my father was alone, sleeping in his easy-chair, and breathing heavily. I aroused him from his troubled slumber, and he complained that he had just felt a deadly chill strike to his heart, but I did not tell him what had caused it. Next night he died."

May did not dare to ask any further question, but after a brief pause he went on :

“ You know how happy I was last night. When I sought my couch I was still dwelling upon the events of the day, and soon sank into a peaceful slumber. But my repose was disturbed by a sense of deadly oppression such as I never before experienced. I felt chilled to the marrow, and could scarcely breathe. Making a convulsive effort to shake off the horrible nightmare, I sprang bolt upright in bed, and then by the dim moonlight that struggled through the window-curtains I distinctly beheld a dark shadow glide through the door. The deadly chill was then accounted for. I instantly sprang from my couch, but the door was shut before I reached it. The next moment, however, I was in the corridor. No one was there. All was hushed and still as the grave. The moonbeams

fell upon the portrait of Sir Alberic, which hangs there, as you may remember. The old warrior seemed to gaze compassionately upon the last of his long line. I have had my warning, May."

"Heaven forbid!" she ejaculated, fervently.

"Ah! it would be hard indeed to leave you for ever, May!" he exclaimed, gazing at her with unutterable tenderness. "Years hence, I hope we shall be seated together beneath this tree, and laugh as we recal the warning. But if it should be otherwise—if I should be suddenly snatched from you by fate—think of what I now say. My last thought will be of you—my last sigh will breathe your name."

"You will make me perfectly wretched if you talk thus," she cried. "Ah! if I were to lose you, I should never be happy again."

"Let us talk of something else. See! there are visitors," he added, pointing out an open

carriage, filled with ladies, which was approaching the mansion. "Let us go meet them."

She took his arm, and they proceeded slowly towards the house. A number of persons were assembled in the garden. The carriage they had seen brought the two Miss Milwards and Jessie Brooke, and after a little lively conversation, a game at croquet was arranged, in which Oswald and two other young men took part.

Leaving May with Colonel Delacombe to watch the game, Sir Charles joined Mr. Radcliffe and Mr. Thornton, who were sauntering along the lawn, and begged them to step into the house with him for a few minutes, and they all three passed through an open French window into the library.

"I require your professional assistance, Mr. Thornton," observed Sir Charles, as they entered the room.

"Most happy to afford it you," replied the

old gentleman. "What do you want me to do?"

"To make my will," replied the other.

Both his hearers expressed surprise, and Mr Thornton thought the baronet must be joking.

"I am perfectly serious," remarked Sir Charles.

"I want the thing done without delay."

"I should be the last person to oppose your determination," said Mr. Thornton; "and I will carry your intentions into effect, if you desire it, but the disposition of a large property like yours ought to be carefully considered. I will take down any instructions you may give me, Sir Charles," he added, seating himself at a table on which writing materials were placed.

"Perhaps I had better retire," remarked Mr. Radcliffe.

"On no account," said the baronet. "I desire your presence, but beg you not to comment upon

my instructions. Let the instrument be as brief as possible," he added to Mr. Thornton. "With the exception of a legacy of thirty thousand pounds to my sister, Lady Richborough, I mean to leave the whole of my property, real and personal—Boxgrove, and all my other estates, to May."

"You have requested me not to make a comment, Sir Charles," observed Mr. Radcliffe; "but I cannot help saying that you are acting far too generously towards my daughter."

"Mr. Radcliffe," said Sir Charles, with profound emotion, "your daughter is dearer to me than any one on earth. Except the sum devoted to my sister, all I have shall be hers."

The tone in which he spoke left no doubt that his resolution was taken, and Mr. Thornton forbore to make a remark.

"I am ready to begin, Sir Charles," he said,

taking up a pen; "but I think you had better delay the matter until after your marriage."

"Not for a single day—not for an hour," he rejoined. "No telling what may happen."

"Very true," observed the old gentleman. "Well, I'll make it as short as I can. Who are to be the executors?"

"Yourself and Mr. Radcliffe, if you will undertake the office."

No objections made. The old gentleman set to work, and in a very few minutes drew up the document, which, important as it was, did not occupy more than half a side of paper.

"This is sufficiently concise, I think," he remarked.

And he read what he had written to Sir Charles, who signified his perfect approval, adding that he wished to execute the instrument forthwith.

"In that case we must have witnesses," said Mr. Thornton. "Lend me your signet-ring, Sir Charles."

While the old gentleman was placing a seal in black wax on the document, Mr. Dancer and two other men-servants were summoned, and in their presence the will was duly executed by Sir Charles, who requested Mr. Thornton to take charge of the document.

"Now that the thing is done, Sir Charles," said the old gentleman, "I must remark that you have hurried yourself very unnecessarily."

"I wished to get the business off my mind," replied the other.

Just then May and Colonel Delacombe appeared at the open window.

"Not a word to her," said the baronet, with a gesture of silence.

She had come to ask him to join the croquet

party, and he willingly complied. He had now quite recovered his cheerfulness, and seemed to have forgotten the nocturnal incident that had caused him so much disquietude.

By this time several more visitors had arrived, and a large and gaily dressed assemblage, in which the gentler sex predominated, was collected on the lawn, where croquet was being played. After an hour spent very agreeably, the gong summoned the company to luncheon, and both Mr. Radcliffe and Mr. Thornton remarked that Sir Charles was in higher spirits than usual.

Luncheon over, croquet was resumed, and kept up till six o'clock, when the visitors departed, and our friends returned to Hazlemere to dinner.

Sir Charles drove May in a mail phaeton which he had just launched. There was another dinner party that day, graced by all the pretty girls who had dined there the day before, together with

three or four others, and a very lively dinner it was, for the champagne flowed freely. Music and dancing followed as before. Plans were made for next day—never, alas! to be realised.

When the moment for separation came the dread presentiment which Sir Charles had hitherto repressed again forced itself upon him. He could scarcely bid her adieu. She, too, felt saddened—and so they parted for ever!

Anxious to hide his emotion, Sir Charles sprang into the mail phaeton, that was waiting for him at the hall-door. He was quickly followed by Colonel Delacombe, who had agreed to return with him to Boxgrove. Next moment they dashed off, and kept up the pace so well that within a quarter of an hour they were in sight of the park gates. It was a lovely moonlight night, and the colonel enjoyed the drive immensely. He smoked his cigar quietly, and

did not trouble himself to talk much, for Sir Charles did not seem inclined for conversation.

All at once, however, he was roused from the dreamy reverie into which he had fallen. Something startled the horses—he could not tell what—for neither he nor Kennedy, the groom, saw anything, but they both heard Sir Charles exclaim :

“Good God! there it is again!”

At the same moment the horses set off at a furious pace, and soon became unmanageable. Sir Charles, though an admirable whip, could not hold them. Perhaps he was unnerved by what he had seen. On they dashed, tearing the ground with their hoofs, till they reached the lodge-gates, which unluckily had been thrown open.

Accustomed to this entrance, the infuriated animals made an attempt to pass through the

gates, but their blind impetuosity brought the carriage in contact with a post and upset the vehicle, throwing out its occupants with great violence.

Colonel Delacombe, though much shaken by the fall, soon regained his legs, and so did Kennedy, but the ill-fated baronet did not move. Roused by the tremendous crash, the lodge-keeper rushed forth, and, seizing the horses, prevented further mischief.

Attention was now turned to Sir Charles, and on raising him, it became evident that he had sustained frightful injuries about the head. Indeed, the colonel feared that the skull was fractured.

As soon as practicable, the unfortunate man was carried into the lodge and laid upon a bed. He groaned deeply, but could not speak. The colonel tended him like a brother. By his direc-

tions, Kennedy mounted one of the horses and rode off to Wootton in quest of Mr. Malham. But before the surgeon arrived the spirit had fled of as gallant a gentleman as ever breathed.

XXV.

HOW THE NEWS WAS BROUGHT TO HAZLEMERE.

THAT night most of the inmates of Hazlemere had retired to rest full of pleasant anticipations of the morrow, but Luff, the butler, and Boston, who slept at the back of the house, were roused from their first slumbers by Kennedy.

The afflicting news was conveyed by the butler to his master and Mr. Thornton, and filled them with consternation. The two gentlemen soon came down-stairs, and were preparing to set out for Boxgrove, when they were stopped by

the arrival of Mr. Malham, who came to inform them that all was over. Both were stunned by the dreadful intelligence.

“Gracious Heaven!” exclaimed Mr. Thornton, when he regained his speech. “How remarkable that Sir Charles should have just made his will. And how anxious he was that there should be no delay. He might have had a presentiment of his approaching end.”

“What a frightful shock it will be to May!” groaned Mr. Radcliffe. “Enough to kill her.”

“I hope Colonel Delacombe is not much hurt?” inquired Mr. Thornton of the surgeon.

“A good deal shaken, but otherwise uninjured,” replied Mr. Malham. “He wished to accompany me, but I prevailed upon him to go up to the hall. It will be better for him to be quiet, though he seems made of iron.”

Having fulfilled his sad errand, the surgeon left

them, promising to call again early on the morrow. But he was not allowed to quit the house without an interview with Mrs. Sutton. Though as little noise as possible was made, the housekeeper heard certain sounds that alarmed her, and hastily attiring herself, came down-stairs, just in time to catch him. She soon learnt the terrible truth.

"But Colonel Delacombe was with Sir Charles," she cried. "Is he, too, killed?"

"No. Fortunately, he has escaped almost unhurt."

"Fate is unjust," she cried. "Sir Charles ought to have been the one spared."

"Very true. What a dreadful business! Never knew anything so shocking. Poor Sir Charles! killed in the prime of life, and just on the eve of marriage with the girl he adored. Dreadful!"

To his horror the door opened and May came in—a taper in her hand, and looking excessively

pale. As it chanced she had not retired to rest, and being alarmed by the disturbance in the house, instead of ringing her bell had come down to see what had happened. On beholding the surgeon, her uneasiness increased.

“You are surprised to find me here at this time of night, Miss Radcliffe,” he said. “The fact is——”

“Do not disguise the truth, Mr. Malham,” she interrupted. “Sir Charles has been taken suddenly ill. I am sure of it. You have come to tell us so.”

“Perhaps it will be best to prepare her,” thought the surgeon. “It is strange you should think this, Miss Radcliffe,” he observed. “But don’t be alarmed, my dear young lady, don’t be alarmed.”

“Is there any danger?” she asked, with forced calmness.

"In illness there is always a certain danger," he answered, evasively.

"But what is the nature of the attack? Speak plainly. It must have been very sudden. He was perfectly well when he went away."

"Yes, it was very sudden," he replied, glancing at the housekeeper.

The look did not pass unnoticed by May.

"Luff and Boston were in the hall as I came down-stairs," she said, "and I heard them talking about an accident. But they hurried off before I could question them. Were they speaking of Sir Charles?"

"Yes, I am sorry to say he has met with an accident——"

"Then my fears are realised," she cried, with a look of so much anguish that the surgeon regretted his words.

But he was spared the necessity of further

explanation by Mr. Radcliffe, who, having heard his daughter's voice, hastened to her.

From her looks he thought she had learnt the dreadful truth.

"Heaven sustain you under this dire affliction, my dear child!" he exclaimed, clasping her to his breast. "Malham has told you all."

"He has told me nothing, papa," she exclaimed. "He has tried to keep the fatal truth from me. But I divined it."

"Alas! my dear child, I cannot hide it from you. You have lost him."

Crying out, as if a shot had pierced her heart, she became insensible in his arms.

"God forgive me! I fear I have killed her, Malham," he cried to the surgeon.

"No, sir—no. The shock could not be otherwise than severe. But it will pass. We must take her up to her room, Mrs. Sutton, and you will re-

main with her during the night. Do not distress yourself, sir. I will answer for her recovery."

The tender father carried her up-stairs himself. At the door of her chamber he consigned her to the surgeon and the housekeeper, and paced to and fro in the passage till they came forth.

Mr. Malham looked much moved, and Mrs. Sutton was weeping.

"Why have you both left her?" cried Mr. Radcliffe.

"There is nothing to fear," replied the surgeon. "She wishes to be alone—to seek for consolation where she is sure to find it. Your daughter is an angel, sir. Mrs. Sutton will return to her presently. Now take my advice, and go to bed. I will be with you early in the morning."

End of the Second Book.

BOOK III.



THE RIVALS.

I.

THE YOUNG MISTRESS OF BOXGROVE.

No event could have caused a more painful sensation than the awfully sudden death of Sir Charles Ilminster, occurring as it did under circumstances so peculiarly distressing. Popular with all classes of society, the ill-fated baronet was universally regretted.

It was thought remarkable that he should have endowed his intended bride with the whole of his large fortune on the very day on which he accidentally met his death ; but this proved the depth

of his attachment to her, and added to the general regret that a cruel fate would not permit their union—a union which no one doubted would have been happy.

To May herself the splendid provision made for her served only to aggravate her sorrow. She understood the motives—inexplicable to others—that had actuated him in making his will so hastily. She recalled every word he had spoken to her, and felt sure he had thought of her at the last.

As her grief, at first overwhelming, began to abate, she was able to realise the position in which Sir Charles's magnificent bequest had placed her. But the wealth she had acquired could not console her, though it might in some degree mitigate the sharpness of her affliction. She loved Boxgrove because he had loved the place, and because its antique chambers, its galleries, its gardens, and its groves recalled his image. He was laid among

his ancestors in the family vault beneath the chapel attached to the Hall, and she daily visited his tomb.

Nothing had been changed at Boxgrove since the house had come into her hands. All the establishment was kept up as it had been in Sir Charles's time. She confided the management of the house to Mr. Thornton and Mrs. Woodcot, who lived with her, and if visitors came she left the old gentleman and her aunt to entertain them. She refused for the present to mix with society, declaring she had lost all taste for it.

But it must not be supposed that she had given way to gloom, and that the secluded life she now led was caused by a morbid feeling of melancholy. Something of her former cheerfulness had returned; and though she had lost the bright look that once belonged to her, and the winning smile that constantly played about her lips had fled, yet

the serene and pensive expression of her countenance heightened its interest. She was graver than before. Sorrow had chastened her heart, but not altered the sweetness of her disposition. Aunt Woodcot thought her more charming than ever, and we incline to think that Aunt Woodcot was right. Grandpapa, whose notions of her had become more exalted with the increase of her wealth, hoped that she would eventually take a very high place in society, but he was content to wait. The young mistress of Boxgrove was now looked upon as the best match in the county, and as nobody supposed she had vowed eternal fidelity to the memory of poor Sir Charles, everybody wondered who would be fortunate enough to obtain her hand. A great deal of court was paid to the Radcliffes as well as to the guardians at Boxgrove, and more than one advantageous offer was quietly declined, without being submitted to the young lady.

Mr. Thornton was extremely well satisfied with his position—and no wonder. Virtually master of a large mansion and a large establishment, he had nothing to do but to study his own comforts, and these he attended to most sedulously.

Aunt Woodcot was equally comfortable. To her, indeed, Boxgrove was a sort of paradise, and her only dread was that she might, one day, be obliged to quit it. Consequently, she was by no means anxious that her niece should marry—unless she married Oswald, of which there seemed little chance. Mrs. Woodcot could now vie with Mrs. Radcliffe, had a carriage entirely at her disposal, and was in fact a person of considerable importance.

To Myrtilla, Sir Charles's sudden death had been a great shock. She was sincerely attached to her brother, but the handsome legacy he had left her, in some measure reconciled her to his

loss. She rather envied May her large acquisitions, but did not complain of being ill-treated. She came down to see "the young widow," as she called her, but was dreadfully bored by Aunt Woodcot, and found the old house duller and more like a convent than ever. Consequently she spent most of her time at Hazlemere.

Colonel Delacombe had gone abroad and taken Hilary with him. They were now at Castellamare, near Naples, in the midst of vineyards and orange-groves. Having received a great deal of encouragement from Lady Richborough, the young man was foolish enough to propose to her, and being rejected, was still more foolish to take his rejection to heart. To cure him the colonel took him abroad. It must not be imagined for a moment that the colonel and Myrtila had quarrelled. They were on as friendly terms as ever, and kept up a constant correspondence.

Knowing they would interest her, Lady Richborough showed Mrs. Radcliffe several of the colonel's letters, in all of which he spoke of Hilary with great affection. In the last that had come to hand he told her that the young man was perfectly cured of his foolish passion. "But I am half afraid," he added, "that he has fallen desperately in love with a fascinating Neapolitan countess, who is staying at the same hotel with us."

"Not very flattering to me," remarked Myrtilla. "But I am glad to hear it, nevertheless."

"I fancied you liked him," said Mrs. Radcliffe.

"Not well enough to marry him. I wonder why men will propose to me. They ought to know better. I have no idea of given up my liberty. Were I in May's position, and mistress of Boxgrove, nothing should induce me to marry."

"I don't think she will," observed Mrs. Radcliffe. "She is inconsolable."

"Inconsolable! I don't believe that. Her fidelity will be put to the test pretty severely by-and-by, you may depend upon it. Plenty of suitors will make their appearance, or I'm very much mistaken, and then we shall see what she will do. By-the-by, did she ever inform you that she had her fortune told at Ascot?"

"She mentioned the circumstance, but did not tell me what the gipsy said."

"It was a singular prediction. I laughed at it then, but I don't know what to think now. It may be fulfilled. Who knows? But to return to the colonel. He inquires if Mrs. Sutton is still with you. I am glad I can tell him she is gone. I won't ask what she did, but I know she was dreadfully mischievous."

"The mischief she has made can never be

set right, I fear. Mr. Radcliffe has never been like himself since she poisoned his mind by her falsehoods. To me she behaved infamously. I treated her like a friend, not as a servant, and gave her my entire confidence. She requited me with the basest ingratitude."

"Have you never discovered the motives of her malice? I know enough of her history to be able to enlighten you as to them. You inadvertently committed a great error in taking her into the house. I am certain she has all along nourished feelings of jealous dislike to you. The colonel's appearance roused these feelings into activity, and unluckily, as it seems, you have placed yourself sufficiently in her power to enable her to do you an injury."

"What has she to do with the colonel?" cried Mrs. Radcliffe, startled. "I thought they were utter strangers to each other."

"Strangers!" echoed Myrtilla. "He knew her long before he knew you."

"Was she his mistress?"

"His *wife*," replied Lady Richborough. "And Hilary is their son. Now you must understand it all?"

"I do, I do," cried Mrs. Radcliffe. "I understand it too well."

"You must not do him an injustice. When he sought your hand, he believed that death had freed him from the chain which he had so foolishly imposed upon himself. It is due to him that you should be satisfied on this point." And she proceeded to give her the details of the colonel's unfortunate marriage. To these Mrs. Radcliffe listened with the deepest interest.

"Until his return from India he believed the wretched woman dead," said Myrtilla, in conclusion; "and you may conceive his horror when

he found he had been deceived by a false report. Not the least surprising part of the strange story is that she should be here—with you—and that their son should be brought hither likewise. It looks like fatality.”

“Strange, indeed,” said Mrs. Radcliffe. “There has always been a certain mystery about Mrs. Sutton, but if I had known who she was I should have been frightened to death of her.”

“What has become of her?” asked Lady Richborough.

“I cannot tell. She left quite suddenly, and contrary to Mr. Radcliffe’s wishes. It would seem, however, that she had made preparations for her departure, for her packages were ready, and she left nothing behind her. She proceeded to London, as we suppose, but she has not been heard of since.”

“I fear you have not seen the last of her,” ob-

served Myrtilla. "What a misfortune to be tied so such a wretch!—and I see no chance of the colonel's deliverance. Hilary is not aware that she is his mother, but he must learn the secret one of these days."

"Yes, however disagreeable it may be to the colonel, an explanation *must* be given," observed Mrs. Radcliffe.

The foregoing conversation will afford some notion of the state of things at Hazlemere. Mrs. Sutton was indeed gone, and no tidings had been received of her since her departure. Her loss was a serious grievance to Mrs. Radcliffe, and even the servants regretted her, for she had contrived to secure their good will. But no one regretted her so much as Mr. Malham. He made constant inquiries after her, and vainly tried to ascertain her address.

II.

A LETTER FROM LADY RICHBOROUGH.

ANOTHER spring has arrived. May Day is again approaching, but no change has yet taken place in the mode of life of the young mistress of Boxgrove. Grandpapa and Aunt Woodcot still reside with her. Mrs. Trapp, poor Sir Charles's housekeeper, who could not brook Mrs. Woodcot's control, has taken Mrs. Sutton's place at Hazlemere. This is the only change in the establishment. There are rarely any visitors, and

consequently the house is as quiet as quiet can be—rather too quiet, indeed, for Mr. Thornton. The Radcliffes are almost as much at Boxgrove as Hazlemere. Mr. Radcliffe has never been able to reconcile himself to the loss of Mrs. Sutton. Neither he nor his wife know what has become of her, as she has never written to them since her departure. Her conduct appears strange and inexplicable to Mr. Radcliffe, but does not surprise his wife, who is delighted to be released from the thralldom in which she has so long been kept. She is sometimes tempted to take Mrs. Trapp into her confidence, but warned by previous experience, prudently abstains. Not even to Mrs. Woodcot has she disclosed the secret of Colonel Delacombe's unfortunate marriage, but the thought of it often troubles her. She never hears from the colonel now. All correspondence between them has ceased. But she obtains tidings of him from

Lady Richborough, and is aware that he is still abroad with his adopted son. She is also aware that he has been dangerously ill, having been attacked by fever and ague at Rome, but is now convalescent.

Things were in this state at the two houses, when one day a communication was received by Mrs. Radcliffe from Lady Richborough, which it will be proper to lay before the reader. The letter arrived by the early post while Mrs. Radcliffe was at breakfast, but she did not read it till she was alone in her boudoir.

“You are quite aware, dear Mrs. Radcliffe, that I do not approve of the secluded life that our dear May is leading, and think she ought to assume the position in society to which the large fortune left her by my brother entitles her. A lovely girl, not yet twenty, with the most brilliant

prospects before her, cannot be allowed to bury herself alive. Poor Sir Charles would not have demanded such a sacrifice. She has paid the full tribute of regret to his memory, and having an important part to play in the world, cannot shrink from it. Such is my opinion, and such, I feel sure, must also be your opinion.

“I need not remind you of the immense sensation she produced last spring. But for her engagement to poor dear Charlie she would have had no end of offers. Chief among her conquests was Lord Robert Tadcaster, who was desperately smitten. At that time he had nothing beyond his title to recommend him. The case is very different now, since, as you must be aware, by the demise of his father and elder brother, he has become Marquis of Hartlepool. With princely domains in Berkshire and Kent, two noble country seats, and a splendid house in Arlington-street, the marquis need not look far for a bride. The

proudest peer in the realm would be happy to give him his daughter.

“You will guess on whom his choice has fallen. The lovely girl who captivated him last spring still remains mistress of his affections, and he has commissioned me to write to you, and make her a formal offer of his hand.

“A proposal from a nobleman of such distinction as the Marquis of Hartlepool cannot be otherwise than favourably entertained—at least by you and Mr. Radcliffe. I account it a signal honour. But in May’s present frame of mind she may be insensible to the importance of the offer, and if left to herself might decline it. It is to prevent the possibility of such a mischance that I now write, urging you to leave nothing undone to bring about a satisfactory result.

“I think you will do better without me than with me; but if you fancy I can be of the slightest use, let me know, and I will run down at once.

"Grandpapa and Aunt Woodcot must exert their influence. Nothing must be neglected. All sorts of good wishes to you all. Adieu !

Your affectionate,

"MYRTILLA.

"P.S. I must not omit to tell you that Colonel Delacombe is in Paris on his way back—much better, though still suffering from the effects of the fever. Hilary is with him. Of course I have told him of Mrs. Sutton's departure, and that nothing has been heard of her since. I shall write to inform him of May's splendid offer. Once more, adieu !"

In an ecstasy of delight, Mrs. Radcliffe rushed down-stairs to communicate the joyful intelligence to her husband. She found him in the library with Mr. Thornton, who had just ridden over from Boxgrove.

“Oh! I am so glad you are here,” she cried to her father. “I have such wonderful news for you—and for you too, my dear. What do you think? Our darling May has had an offer from no less a person than the Marquis of Hartlepool.”

“Why, he’s her old admirer, Lord Robert Tadcaster—only raised to the first rank of the peerage,” observed Mr. Thornton. “He was deuced lucky in getting rid of his elder brother, the earl.”

“You shall hear what Lady Richborough says about him, for it is through her that the offer has been made,” replied Mrs. Radcliffe.

And taking a seat, she read the letter, which produced a great effect upon both her hearers. When she had done, the old gentleman manifested his delight by a chuckling laugh.

“Well, this surpasses my expectations,” he cried. “As her ladyship very properly observes,

the proposal of a nobleman of such distinction as the Marquis of Hartlepool is a signal honour."

Mr. Radcliffe was less excited, and quietly remarked, "I feel as much gratified as you do, Mr. Thornton, but——"

"There must be no 'buts' in the case," interrupted the old gentleman. "May *must* accept the marquis."

"Decidedly my opinion," said Mrs. Radcliffe. "There can be no hesitation. Where the interests of the family are concerned, as they are now, she is bound to sacrifice her own feelings. But I do not see that she can raise any objection to her noble suitor. She rather liked him as Lord Robert Tadcaster."

"If she did, which I very much doubt," observed Mr. Radcliffe, "poor Sir Charles did not share her sentiments. I hope she will view the matter in the same light that we do; but I have great misgivings."

"She cannot be allowed to have her own way," cried Mrs. Radcliffe.

"Certainly not," said Mr. Thornton. "Lady Richborough urges me to exert my influence over her, and I shall not fail to do so. But if you exercise your paternal authority, she will not venture to disobey," he added to Mr. Radcliffe.

"I shall simply state my wishes," replied the worthy gentleman. "Personally, I feel honoured by the offer. It would be a proud day to me to see my daughter wedded to the Marquis of Hartlepool, but I will not force her to accept him. As far as I am concerned, I shall leave the decision entirely to herself."

"I really have no patience with you, my dear," exclaimed Mrs. Radcliffe. "May has been allowed to indulge her grief a great deal too long, and it will be a reproach to us if we allow her to continue in this state of seclusion. I have not as yet interfered with her, because, judging by other

people, I naturally concluded that her sorrow would abate, but I see no signs of improvement. I should be as weak as the girl herself if I suffered her to throw away this brilliant chance because she is unwilling to cast off her sentimental sorrow. I shall point out what she ought to do, and insist upon compliance with my injunctions."

Mr. Thornton signified his approval very emphatically.

"You forget, Mr. Radcliffe," pursued the lady, "that May is not yet twenty. Are you justified in allowing her to have her own way?"

"Though under twenty, she is her own mistress, and can act as she pleases," replied Mr. Radcliffe. "If she prefers retirement to splendour; if, from motives which I can appreciate, she declines to marry; I shall not attempt to dissuade her from following her inclinations!"

Mr. Thornton coughed dryly, and winked at his daughter.

"All very fine," cried Mrs. Radcliffe, with a sneer. "But I will do my best to make her Marchioness of Hartlepool."

"And so will I," added the old gentleman.

Mrs. Radcliffe then arose, and intimated her intention of writing to Lady Richborough to thank her for her letter, and tell her how highly honoured they all felt by the marquis's proposal, and that no time should be lost in laying it before May.

"After luncheon," she added, "we will drive over to Boxgrove, and I will then speak to the dear child, and ascertain her sentiments. If I find it necessary, I shall use a little gentle—very gentle—persuasion. Are you going, papa?" she added to Mr. Thornton, who followed her to the door. "Won't you stay luncheon?"

"No," he replied. "I want to astonish Mrs. Woodcot with the wonderful news."

"I'm not sure that she will be pleased," said Mrs. Radcliffe. "But not a word to May till I arrive."

"That is quite understood," rejoined the old gentleman. "Good-bye for the present. We shall meet again anon."

With this he proceeded to the stable, mounted his stout cob, and trotted off to Boxgrove, determined in his own mind that his grand-daughter should become Marchioness of Hartlepool.

III.

OSWALD REAPPEARS AS A SUITOR.

ON reaching the mansion, he found, to his surprise, that Oswald had just arrived, and he was a good deal put out by the circumstance, for he knew that Mrs. Woodcot still cherished hopes of securing the great prize for her son.

“What the deuce has brought him here at this juncture?” thought the old gentleman. “He will be confoundedly in the way. I must try to get rid of him.”

Oswald was with his mother in a charming little room looking upon the garden, which Mrs. Woodcot had appropriated ; and to this room Mr. Thornton at once repaired. He greeted Oswald with his usual cordiality, but expressed surprise at seeing him.

"I am here in obedience to a summons which I received from my mother, sir," replied the young man.

"You have brought a lot of luggage with you, I find," cried his grandsire, rather gruffly. "I suppose you mean to make a long stay."

"I shall only stay as long as I can make myself agreeable, sir," rejoined Oswald. "My mother will explain to you why she sent for me."

"Yes, I have a little project in view for him, and calculate upon your assistance," observed Mrs. Woodcot.

"Before you say any more," interrupted Mr. Thornton, anticipating what was coming, "let me

give you a piece of news which I have brought back with me from Hazlemere. The Marquis of Hartlepool has made May a formal proposal of marriage. The offer has been conveyed by Lady Richborough to Mrs. Radcliffe. What do you think of that, eh?"

"What do I think of it?" cried Oswald, in dismay. "I think it an infernal nuisance?"

"Aha!" cried Mr. Thornton. "You have let the cat out of the bag. This spoils your little game, eh?"

"Yes, sir, I rather think it does; and though the proposed alliance may be very dazzling, I cannot doubt that you will give the preference to your own grandson. Surely it will be better to keep this fine place in our own family than relinquish it to a nobleman in whom you have no interest."

"Oswald's claims upon you are superior to those of any other," observed Mrs. Woodcot.

"You seem to forget that he has already been rejected. What likelihood is there that he will be accepted now?"

"Every likelihood, if you will assist me, sir," cried the young man. "None if you support my noble rival."

"You are always sanguine, Oswald," observed his grandsire; "but I don't think you have a ghost of a chance; so you may as well retire from a contest in which you are certain to be worsted."

"Never," cried Oswald. "I am more in love with May than ever."

"With her fortune?" said his grandsire.

"With herself. And I shall esteem you a very unnatural grandfather if you desert me now."

"I have given you plenty of proofs of my affection," said the old gentleman. "I make you a tolerably good allowance. I have con-

stituted you my heir, and if you can find a wife of whom I approve, money shan't stand in the way. But I tell you fairly I can't and won't help you now. This is a most important alliance, and I shall do my best to promote it. We have settled it amongst us, and it is to be."

"I am very sorry to hear it," observed Mrs. Woodcot. "You have very little consideration for May's happiness. Grand though the alliance may be, Boxgrove is too high a price to pay for it."

"I'll hear no more on the subject," said Mr. Thornton, in a positive tone. "Take my advice, Oswald. Propose to Jessie Brooke. She'll suit both of us."

"No, sir, I'll forswear marriage altogether."

"As you please," rejoined his grandsire. "But mark me! not a word to May before her mother's arrival."

And he quitted the room.

"So our scheme's upset," cried Oswald. "The old gentleman is dead against us."

"We are not beaten yet," replied his mother. "In spite of his interdiction, I will speak to May."

On leaving Mrs. Woodcot and her son, Mr. Thornton, who did not feel altogether easy, put on his hat, and sallied out into the garden. The strong appeal made to him had not been without effect, though he resisted it, but as he walked along the terrace, ever and anon pausing to survey the stately old mansion, or allow his gaze to wander over the park, he could not help feeling that it would be a pity to allow so magnificent a place to go out of the family. Still, he held to his determination.

"No, no," he mentally ejaculated, "I must not hesitate. It is painful to me to thwart Oswald—vexatious to give up this place, but I must do it. May must be Marchioness of Hartlepool."

While thus musing, he saw the young lady herself issue from a yew-tree alley at the farther end of the garden. She was not alone, and either his eyes deceived him or the person with her was Mrs. Sutton. Greatly surprised, he stood still to examine the latter personage more narrowly, and became convinced that he was right. For a minute or two neither of them noticed him, but when they did so, Mrs. Sutton instantly disappeared in the alley. The old gentleman's curiosity was greatly excited by the incident.

May now advanced to meet him. Her deep mourning set off the exquisite fairness of her complexion, and her beauty was not diminished by the shade of sadness that sat upon her brow.

"Good day, dear grandpapa," she said. "I thought you were at Hazlemere."

"Just come back," he rejoined. "Your mamma will be here by-and-by. She has got
for you—but I mustn't forestall it.

Pray who was with you just now? Surely it couldn't be Mrs. Sutton, yet it looked uncommonly like her."

"It was Mrs. Sutton," replied May. "But I must entreat you not to mention to mamma or any of them that you have seen her. I have promised that her visit shall be kept secret."

"I suppose I mustn't ask what she has come about?"

"Please don't, for I can't tell you."

"At least, you can tell me why she has never written to your mamma since she left Hazlemere."

"I can answer no questions respecting her," returned May, mysteriously.

"Well, I think, if I were you, I wouldn't encourage her visits. If she must come at all, let her come openly. In any case, don't let her persuade you to engage her as housekeeper. She and your aunt would never get on together."


"Mrs. Sutton has no wish to take the situation, grandpapa, and I should never dream of offering it to her."

"Well, come and sit down with me on this bench. I want to talk to you. It sometimes occurs to me, my dear child," he observed, regarding her earnestly, "that you must be tired of the quiet life you are leading here."

"On the contrary, dear grandpapa, I am perfectly happy—that is, as happy as I can ever hope to be," she remarked, with a sigh. "I grow fonder of the place every day, and never desire to quit it. All those I love are with me, or come to see me daily, and I care for no other society. I do not find the time pass heavily. As you know, I am always employed, and though sadness will sometimes steal over me, I never give way to gloom. Make yourself easy about me, dear grandpapa. I like this tranquil mode of life,

wholly free from excitement, and my only fear is lest something should occur to disturb it."

"All very pretty, but you are too young to retire from the world, and really must return to it. If you were some thirty or forty years older—had entirely lost your charms—had incurred many disappointments—I would not say a word against the course you are pursuing. But you are in the very spring-time of life, when everything wears its brightest and gayest colours—as we may see by glancing at those parterres—and when your spirits ought to be at their best. Grief does not endure for ever. It is not meant that it should do so. Ere long, when the wounds in your heart are fully healed, the image which is now constantly before you will insensibly fade away, and be succeeded by another. New objects of interest will arise, and if you do not forget the past, you will think of it without pain.



This is the law of nature, and your case can be no exception to the law."

May sighed, but made no answer, and grandpapa went on :

"You must consider, my dear, that you have duties to fulfil in connexion with your large property—duties that cannot be neglected. You are bound to occupy a certain position."

"But you and papa discharge all these duties for me. You know, dear grandpapa, I cannot attend to matters of business, and do not even understand them. Whatever you deem necessary, I will do. Hitherto you have spared me all trouble, and I cannot be sufficiently grateful for your kindness."

"I do not speak of matters of business, my dear, but of the duties incumbent upon your position. You cannot consistently avoid taking your proper place in society. Already, I and

your aunt have been blamed for allowing you to immure yourself so long—you know with what justice. I can no longer, therefore, forbear to remonstrate. The idea may be repugnant to your present feelings, but since with your large fortune you are not likely to remain single, let me counsel you to marry a man of rank—of *high rank*. You *can* do it. Think over what I have said.”

So saying, he got up and marched off at a quick pace towards the farther end of the garden.

May was ruminating over his words, and wondering whether they had any special significance, when she was joined by her aunt, who came out to tell her that Oswald had unexpectedly arrived.

“But you look unusually sad, my love,” said Mrs. Woodcot, with an air of much concern. “What distresses you? You know you can confide all your little griefs to me.”

"I fear I do not make you and grandpapa as comfortable as I desire," replied May. "Is there anything I can do for you? Only tell me, and it shall be done."

"You perfectly astonish me, my love. Surely your grandpapa has not been complaining? He sometimes grumbles without reason."

"No, aunty dear, he has not been complaining. But he does not seem quite satisfied with me, and I am sure I am most anxious to please him."

"You must have misapprehended him, my love. What has he been saying to you?"

"He says that people blame you and him for allowing me to lead so retired a life, and that you ought to force me to go into society. Now society, as you know, dear aunty, is utterly distasteful to me. I am not equal to it. Not content with dragging me back to the world, he would have me marry."

"I, too, would have you marry, my love," said Mrs. Woodcot. "And that before long."

"Perhaps you would have me marry a nobleman. You think that rank would make me happy?"

"No, I don't say that. Splendour, I know, has few attractions for you. Besides, your position is already ensured, and your fortune so large that you require no addition to it. Circumstanced as you are, the choice of a husband rests with yourself, and, to ensure your happiness, you ought to choose one whom you know to be devoted to you, with whose character and disposition you are perfectly acquainted, and whose tastes are not dissimilar to your own."

"Such a one as Oswald," remarked May, with a smile.

"Exactly," rejoined Mrs. Woodcot. "Of all your adorers there is none truer to you than he.

He submitted to the sentence that you passed upon him without a murmur—but he never ceased to love. And now—with my permission—he ventures to come forward again.”

May uttered an exclamation of displeasure.

“Forgive me, if I have done wrong, my love, in summoning him; but knowing there was likely to be a question of marriage, I could not help giving the poor fellow a chance. Ah! he loves you dearly, May.”

“What do you mean by a question of marriage, aunt?” asked May, uneasily.

“You will learn that soon enough,” returned Mrs. Woodcot.

“But I suppose a husband is not to be forced upon me!”

“You are your own mistress, my love, and can do as you please. If you think I have pre-

sumed too much in regard to Oswald, I will send him away at once."

"No, don't do that, aunty. He doesn't trouble me in the least. I fear there is some one else who cannot be disposed of so easily."

"Pray don't ask me any more questions, my love. I have told you more than I ought. Thank you a thousand times for permitting Oswald to remain."

"No thanks are due, for I cannot give him a hope. Tell him so, aunty. Ah! here he comes," she exclaimed, as the young man was seen advancing towards them along the terrace.

May received him with unaffected kindness, and really appeared glad to see him, but after a little conversation on general matters, she excused herself and went into the house.

"A very affectionate greeting from my fair cousin," observed Oswald, as soon as she was

gone. "I hope I may draw a favourable conclusion from it. Have you said anything to her?"

"Yes, I have opened the business."

"Well!"

"You are allowed to remain—that's something."

"Everything," he cried, exultingly. "With your help, mother, I'll win her."

"Don't be too sanguine, Oswald. We shall have to contend with them all. We shall see what effect your aunt Radcliffe produces with the Marquis of Hartlepool."

IV.

A SECRET DIVULGED.

LATER on in the day, a long interview took place between Mrs. Radcliffe and May, and when the former issued from the room in which she had been closeted with her daughter, she looked flushed and angry, and, in answer to her husband's inquiries, told him to go to the wayward girl, and see what he could do with her. Mr. Radcliffe at once obeyed the mandate.

"Your mamma has sent me to you, my love," he said, as he entered the room, "to reinforce

the arguments she has used in favour of the splendid offer that has just been made you, but I wish you at once to understand that I shall leave you entirely to follow the dictates of your own heart."

"Thank you, dearest papa. This is only what I expected from you. Without reference to this particular proposal—the importance of which I feel as much as mamma or yourself—I wish to ask you a question: do you think I ought to marry?"

"I have no hesitation in answering the question in the affirmative," he replied. "I think you ought. Your long and utter seclusion from society has given me, I will now confess, considerable uneasiness, and I shall rejoice at your restoration to the world. I shall rejoice still more to see you wedded to one deserving of you, and on whom you can bestow your affec-

tions. In the choice you may make, consult your own feelings, and do not be governed by our wishes. Much may be said in favour of the present offer, and if rank and splendour weigh with you, accept the Marquis of Hartlepool. But I question whether you would not be happier with one of less exalted position. However, decide for yourself. You look as if you had something to say to me," he added, in a kind and encouraging tone.

May remained silent. The colour mounted to her cheeks, but she soon became pale again.

"Speak, my dear child—speak," he said. "You need have no secrets from me."

"I will make a full confession to you, dearest papa," she rejoined. "I will let you know the exact state of my feelings. But I fear you will be displeased."

"Have no such fear," he rejoined, kindly.

Taking a small velvet tabouret, she knelt down upon it beside him, and looked up into his face.

"You look like my child of former days!" he cried, pressing his lips to her fair brow.

"I would go back to former days," she rejoined. "You may remember, dearest papa, that at first I was strangely insensible to Sir Charles's noble qualities and devotion. I was blinded by a feeling for another which had taken possession of me. Fortunately, I was able to crush it. But of late that feeling has revived, and unless I can conquer it as I did before, it will overpower my resolutions, and in spite of myself I shall love again."

"You are in love already, I perceive," he observed, smiling. "Well, who has resumed his mastery over your heart?"

"I will have no concealment from you, dearest papa. The person whose image will recur to me

in spite of all my efforts to banish it, is Hilary St. Ives—Colonel Delacombe's adopted son."

"Ha!" exclaimed her father, as if a bullet had pierced his breast, while May, surprised and alarmed at the extreme agitation he displayed, regretted having divulged her secret.

"Have you seen him?" cried the agonised father. "Have you had any communication with him? Is he aware of the state of your feelings towards him?"

"How is that possible, dearest papa? He has been abroad, as you know, for many months, and during the whole of that time I have neither heard from him nor written to him. He was never aware that I took the slightest interest in him."

"Thank Heaven!" exclaimed Mr. Radcliffe, greatly relieved. "You must think of him no more, May."

"Your prohibition is strangely at variance with your late kind expressions. You said I ought to consult my own feelings."

"But I never dreamed of this young man, or I should have warned you against him. I warn you now," he cried, solemnly. "There are reasons why you can never marry him."

"What are they, papa?"

"I can enter into no explanation," he rejoined, with a sternness to which she was wholly unaccustomed.

"But, dearest papa, tell me your objections to him. Perhaps they can be removed."

"Never!—they never can be removed. Banish every thought of him. If you would not incur my serious displeasure, May, you will never mention his name again."

Then pushing her from him, he arose, and muttered to himself, "What have I done to

deserve this torture?—why should I be placed in this cruel situation?”

She watched him with alarm, unable to comprehend the cause of his violent emotion, but confident in his love she came softly towards him, and took his hand.

“There is something more in this than the circumstances warrant,” she said, looking entreatingly at him. “Tell me, I beseech you, what it is.”

“I cannot,” he replied, emphatically. “The subject is too painful to be further discussed. My sentiments have totally changed since our converse began. I am now of opinion that you ought to accept the splendid offer you have received.”

“But, papa, I do not love the marquis, and do not care for the title.”

“Love will come in time, and the title will

gratify my pride. That ought to be sufficient for you. It is my wish that you should become Marchioness of Hartlepool."

"I have never disobeyed you, dearest papa——"

"Then obey me now."

And he quitted the room, leaving her in a state almost of stupefaction at his inexplicable conduct.

V.

MRS. SUTTON'S CONFESSION.

THAT day May could not follow her ordinary occupations. Her mind was unsettled, and it seemed as if she had quite lost the serenity which she had only recently regained.

To one person only could she confide her griefs, and towards evening she went in search of her.

Quitting the garden, where she had been walking by herself for some time, she entered the park, and, descending the slopes, tracked a path

which led her through a grove of chesnuts, and eventually brought her to a private gate, through which she passed out into the road.

Descending the hill, she soon reached her destination—a secluded little cottage, standing by the roadside, covered by roses and eglantines.

This humble dwelling was occupied by an old dame, one of her pensioners, but it was not to see Widow Perrins that she had come thither. Her approach was perceived by some one inside, and as she drew near the door was opened by Mrs. Sutton, who expressed great pleasure at seeing her, and ushered her into a little room, which was furnished very simply, but looked extremely clean and tidy.

“How very kind of you, dear, to come and see me,” said Mrs. Sutton, offering her a seat. “I have been expecting you all day. Dame Perrins is in her own room, and won’t disturb us.

You can talk freely, for, as you know, she is so deaf that she can't hear a word we say. I perceive from your looks that you have something to tell me. If you want advice, be sure I will give you the best in my power."

"I am very unhappy, Sutton," replied May—"very unhappy indeed. But I know that I shall obtain from my dear old nurse, who loves me as fondly as ever, the sympathy which every one else denies me."

And she then proceeded to relate circumstantially all that had occurred—describing her mother's displeasure at her unwillingness to accept the Marquis of Hartlepool's offer, and her father's explosion of rage at her confession of a secret love for Hilary—to all of which Mrs. Sutton listened with profound interest.

"You will now understand why I am so unhappy, dear Sutton," said May, in conclusion.

"I know not what to do. My desire is to live at Boxgrove quietly—but they will not let me rest. Whether I shall have strength to resist the combination against me, I cannot tell. I fear not. Papa, upon whose support I counted, deserts me. As I have told you, he authoritatively enjoins me to abandon all idea of Hilary. What can be his motive for the prohibition I cannot tell, but I am sure he is inflexible."

"I will explain his motive," replied Mrs. Sutton, after a pause. "There must be no further concealment. You will abhor me when you learn what I have done. I am the cause of your father's antipathy to Hilary. I have poisoned his mind—made him believe that the young man is too nearly allied to you ever to be your husband—in a word, that his mother is your mother."

Shocked beyond all expression, May could scarcely credit what she had heard. For some

moments she could not speak, but at last she exclaimed,

“Oh, Sutton, if any one but yourself had told me this, I would not have believed it. What instigated you to such dreadful wickedness?”

“Jealousy. I always hated your mother.”

May looked at her with amazement.

“And you avow this to me, who know that mamma showed you nothing but kindness.”

“Her kindness increased my hatred. My nature is evil. Having the means of vengeance in my power, I used them as I have told you. The charge was false in every way — doubly false from me.”

“Why from you?” demanded May, appalled by her language and demeanour.

“Because the young man in question is my own son,” replied Mrs. Sutton.

“Your son!” exclaimed May, horror-stricken, and sinking back in the chair.

"Oh! if you knew the terrible remorse I have felt for my crime, you would pity and perhaps forgive me," exclaimed the wretched woman.

"Expect neither pity nor forgiveness from me," cried May, shuddering as she regarded her. "The incalculable misery you have caused would check any such feelings. But answer me one question You have declared that Hilary is your son. Were you married to his father?"

"As Heaven shall judge me—yes! It was a secret marriage, and productive of nothing but misery both to myself and to him I had wedded. He thought me beneath him, and was ashamed of me. But he knew not, and knows not to this hour, that my family is better than his own. I would willingly draw a veil over this portion of my unhappy life. But I must refer to it. Not many months after my marriage my husband left me. I knew he would never return. I knew

I had not his love. I knew he wished to get rid of me, for he had told me so, and I was just as anxious to be freed from him. I devised a plan which would liberate us from our fetters without scandal. It was to disappear from the world. My stratagem succeeded. He believed I was drowned in the Severn, and his belief remained unshaken till we met again after many years, and he recognised in Mrs. Sutton, the housekeeper, the wife he had supposed long since dead."

Astounded by the revelations made her, May remained silent for some minutes.

"But you have not spoken of your infant son," she said. "How could you abandon him? Had you no mother's feelings in your breast?"

"The sufferings I have endured may, perhaps, serve to expiate my unnatural conduct," rejoined the wretched woman. "I knew the child was

cared for by its father; but though I did not dare to make any direct inquiries from the persons to whom it had been entrusted, I ascertained that it was well treated. I did more—but alas! not all I might have done. I left my poor child to strangers, but they were kinder to him than his unnatural mother.”

Here her utterance was broken by sobs, and she was quite overcome by emotion.

“You say that your family is better than that of Colonel Delacombe,” observed May.

“I have spoken the truth,” replied Mrs. Sutton.

“But what does that matter now?”

“It matters much to your son,” replied May.


“He shall know all it may be needful for him to learn,” rejoined the inscrutable woman, “but there are some things I cannot—will not tell him. I have forfeited the right to claim him as a son.”

“How so?” cried May, in fresh perplexity.

Mrs. Sutton did not heed the question, but continued almost fiercely,

“Imagine the torments I experience when I know and feel that I am for ever debarred from a mother’s privileges. The ardent love I bear my son will never be gratified. When I have stood beside him the effort to stifle my feelings has well nigh killed me. It has been said—said falsely—that the voice of nature will always speak out. In him it was mute. Once, when he slept, I pressed my lips to his brow. That is the sole solace my mother’s heart has known. I thought he could read my feelings in my looks—but no! no! he was utterly insensible. I would give the residue of my life for a few words from him; but I shall never have it. I do not deserve it. It is retribution—retribution.”

She pressed her hands to her eyes, and when she uncovered her face, it was ghastly white.



"I shall never know peace on earth," she exclaimed "Life has become a burden to me, and the sooner it is ended the better. I am only in the way."

Her utter despair excited May's compassion, and she attempted to offer some consolation, but the wretched woman refused to be comforted.

Ere long, however, she mastered her emotion, and spoke more calmly.

"I dare not advise you," she said. "Good counsel cannot proceed from lips like mine—but your life has been so pure and blameless that you are certain to meet your reward—just as I have met mine for my evil deeds. Obey your father—would I had obeyed mine!—obey him, I exhort you, as you would be happy, for disobedience will bring down a judgment. Tell him all I have told you. Hide nothing from him. If he then consents to your marriage with Hilary, all will be well. If he forbids it—yield!"

While they had been thus occupied, evening had come on, and it was now almost dark.

So engrossed were they that neither of them had remarked that a listener was outside, who had lost not a word of their discourse. A man, who looked like a gipsy, had watched May enter the cottage, and stealing up to the little lattice window, which, as we have intimated, was covered by creepers, and which unluckily was left partially open, had planted himself so that he could see and hear what was going on inside.

What he heard interested him deeply, and he never quitted his post till May, remarking that it was growing late, signified her intention of returning.

He then crept off, but concealed himself among some trees on the opposite side of the road.

Here he remained perdu till May came forth with Mrs. Sutton, who had insisted on attending

her to the hall, and he then cautiously followed them.

Followed them through the gate into the park, and through the chesnut grove, where the shade of the trees made it sombre.

May had no fears. But fancying she heard footsteps, she grasped her companion's arm, and the latter immediately stopped. They listened for a moment or two, but nothing occurring to alarm them, they set off again.

Still the man followed.

As they issued from the grove, the old mansion rose before them in all its grandeur, with a crescent moon hanging over its summit, tipping the vanes with silver.

Even at that hour, and imperfectly seen, the park looked lovely, and as May looked down the long sweeping glade, she could just descry the branching antlers of the deer, showing where they were couched beneath the trees.

In a very short space of time they had reached the garden, and Mrs. Sutton's attendance being no longer required, she prepared to take leave.

During the rapid walk she had scarcely made an observation, but now she had evidently something to say, but profound emotion prevented her from giving utterance to it.

"I must now bid you adieu, Sutton," said May. "I feel certain papa will desire an interview with you; and if he does, you will not disappoint him, will you?"

"If he wishes to see me I will come—*if I can*," she replied, with strange significance.

"Banish these gloomy thoughts!" cried May. "Much happiness, I trust, is yet in store for you."

"No," she replied, in a tone that sounded like a knell—"no chance of happiness for me on earth.

And she hurried away.

May gazed after her, and could just distinguish that she waved her hand, before she disappeared among the trees.

As May hastened towards the house, a scream was heard, apparently proceeding from the chesnut grove. She listened intently, but there was no second cry.

Just then a gardener came up. He had heard no scream, but instantly ran off to the chesnut grove. In less than ten minutes he came back with the assurance that her alarm was groundless. He had been as far as the gate, and had seen no one.

Early next morning, May, who could not free herself from uneasiness, set out to make inquiries concerning Mrs. Sutton. The morning was so exquisite that it might have tempted her forth, even if she had had no particular object in view.

Everything wore a smiling aspect, the charming old-fashioned garden, with its smooth lawns, its variegated flower-beds, and its alleys—the park with its long glades, its clumps of trees and thickets. The deer were trooping down the slopes, the rooks cawing loudly in the trees, and the groves vocal with melody. The exhilarating feeling which such a morning always inspires did not fail in its effect on May.

Heedless of the heavy dew upon the sward, she speeded towards the chesnut grove, but before reaching it she was cheered by the sight of Mrs. Sutton, and quickened her pace to meet her.

“Oh, Sutton,” she exclaimed, “I am so glad to see you safe and well. After you left me last night, I heard a scream, and fancied it might proceed from you.”

“Yes. A ruffian stopped me in the grove, and

threatened me, but fled when I cried out for help. I have not yet recovered from the fright he caused me. The villain had been lurking near the cottage, and overheard what passed between us. His motive for stopping me was to extort money. I defied him, and he threatened me. But it will not be safe for me to remain longer here. I was coming in search of you to tell you this. I thought I should find you in the garden."

"But what have you to fear from this villain, Sutton? He will not dare to molest you further."

"No, I cannot remain," she replied. "I dare not. I know not whither I shall go. I have no fixed plan. But I will write and let you know where a letter will reach me."

"Come with me to the house now, and await papa's arrival. He will be here this morning. You can then give him the necessary explanation."

"No, not now," she rejoined. "It would be hazardous for me to remain here." And she added, hastily, "I shrink from a meeting with your mother, and I could scarcely avoid encountering her."

At this moment a blithe shout was heard. It proceeded from Oswald, who had just issued forth into the park, and descried them. On seeing him Mrs. Sutton bade the young lady a hurried farewell, and plunged into the grove.

Luckily Oswald had not recognised Mrs. Sutton. Besides, he was too eager to take advantage of the opportunity now offered him to waste a moment in idle discourse.

Poor fellow! he went over the old ground—made the same protestations of undying affection that he made a year ago, and with pretty nearly the same result—the only difference being that May did not laugh at him as she used to do formerly, but, on the contrary, looked grave.

Still he would not be discouraged, but implored her so earnestly and so humbly to accord him a few days' grace, and not reject him summarily, that she assented.

"Give me a week," he cried. "At the end of that time, if you do not change your mind, I will retire for ever. But promise not to accept any one else in the interim."

"You have no right to ask for such a promise, Oswald," she replied. "Nevertheless, I give it."

Transported with delight, he took her hand, and would have kissed it, if he had dared.

"You must not presume upon my good nature, Oswald," she said, coldly. "I do not give you a hope."

He did not hazard a reply, lest he should mar his prospects, which he thought were brightening.

VI.

THE MARQUIS OF HARTLEPOOL.

MRS. RADCLIFFE'S letter (as perhaps was intended by the writer) was forwarded by Lady Richborough to the Marquis of Hartlepool, accompanied by a little billet from her ladyship, recommending him to go down to Hazlemere, and carry on his suit in person, and assuring him that the Radcliffes would be delighted to see him.

The marquis acted upon the advice, and, having previously written to announce his coming,

was received by Mr. Radcliffe with all the consideration due to his high rank. Of course, preparations had been made for him, and a few of the best people in the neighbourhood were invited to meet him at dinner.

From her previous acquaintance with the marquis's character, Mrs. Radcliffe had been rather alarmed at the idea of having him as a guest, but he soon set her at her ease. All prejudices against him on the score of coxcombry were speedily dispelled. No longer haughty and supercilious, his manner was almost captivating; while his personal appearance seemed also improved, and Mrs. Radcliffe wondered how she could ever have thought him otherwise than handsome.

Mr. Radcliffe, who had certainly no predilection for him, was not proof against the charm of his manner, but confessed to Mr. Thornton that he was most agreeably surprised.

But the marquis's most signal triumph was

over Oswald, who dined that day Hazlemere, and was forced to admit that his noble rival was a most agreeable person. It is true that the marquis paid him particular attention, and flattered his vanity.

Lady Richborough had arrived just before dinner, having received a telegraphic message from Mrs. Radcliffe begging her to come down, and though she had engagements in town, she good-naturedly gave them up, and complied.

One person, however, successfully resisted the marquis's fascinations, and viewed his conduct with a jaundiced eye. Mrs. Woodcot felt angry with Oswald for allowing himself to be seduced by his rival's manner, and prepared to give him a severe lecture for his folly when they were alone.

Needless, we think, to state that May was not present. No persuasions could induce her

to join the dinner, but she reluctantly consented to receive the marquis on the following day at Boxgrove.

After dinner the marquis had a long tête-à-tête with the lady of the house, and told her how passionately enamoured he was of her daughter. Mrs. Radcliffe gave him every encouragement in her power, and almost ventured to answer for May. With the prestige of his high rank, his charming manner, and genuine passion, she thought he must prove irresistible.

Grandpapa was in a state of perfect beatitude as he drove back that night to Boxgrove, and could not find terms sufficiently strong to express his admiration of the marquis.

Mrs. Woodcot ventured to differ with him, but was put down instantly, and Oswald was bidden to hold his tongue, unless he could say something to the purpose.

“I won’t hear a word against him,” cried Mr. Thornton. “He is the best specimen of a nobleman I ever met with. May is the luckiest girl alive to have secured him, and I shall be the proudest old fellow in England when I am grandfather—as I soon shall be—to the Marchioness of Hartlepool—ha! ha! ha!”

It will be seen that our convivial old friend had not neglected the claret.

So far everything seemed propitious to the marquis. The affair was in excellent train, and promised a most satisfactory result. Never had Mrs. Radcliffe been in better spirits than at breakfast on the following morning. She had almost reached the height of her ambition, and could scarcely contain her delight. Her great desire now was that May should be married without delay.

About noon, an open carriage conveyed the

whole party to Boxgrove. The day was singularly auspicious, and the park could not possibly have been seen to greater advantage.

The marquis was enraptured by its beauty. He had two large parks of his own, but neither of them could be compared to this magnificent domain. Lady Richborough, who was with Mrs. Radcliffe in the barouche, excited his enthusiasm by pointing out the chief beauties of the place, and drew his attention to some of the oldest trees.

They were still slowly mounting the steep hill, when May, who was taking her exercise in the park, accompanied by Oswald and grand-papa, rode towards them, and with infinite grace and courtesy welcomed her visitor.

The marquis was a little disconcerted by this unexpected meeting, having prepared himself for a more ceremonious reception, but he did not allow his disappointment to appear.

Unluckily the fine speeches he intended to deliver had to be postponed to a more fitting opportunity, and he was obliged to confine himself to commonplace observations. However, he rattled away in a very lively manner, and if he did not interest May, he amused her.

The young lady rode by the side of the carriage as far as the gates, and then left her noble suitor to the care of grandpapa, and continued her exercise in the park; nor did she reappear till the gong had sounded for luncheon. In his efforts to please her, the marquis was materially aided by Myrtille, but though he exerted himself to the utmost, he felt that he had not made much progress.

Both Mrs. Radcliffe and Lady Richborough were convinced that May would not grant him the tête-à-tête he so ardently desired, and they therefore agreed to contrive it. But Oswald was on the alert to defeat their object.

After luncheon, Myrtilla suggested that they should visit the gallery, the marquis having expressed a wish to see the family portraits. Of course May assented, and they all repaired thither.

Naturally familiar with the histories of her ancestors and ancestresses, Lady Richborough described several of the portraits, but seizing an opportunity when May was engaged in conversation with the marquis, she made her escape, and left them together.

The precious moment was not lost. Instantly changing his discourse, the marquis began to plead his suit in impassioned terms, but before he had ended, Oswald joined them, and, regardless of the annoyance which he evidently caused his noble rival, remained.

VII.

AN UNEXPECTED ARRIVAL.

WHILE the little incident just narrated took place in the portrait-gallery, a stranger had arrived at the mansion.

A tall, dark-complexioned, good-looking young man, well-dressed, and of distinguished appearance. He inquired for Lady Richborough, stating that he had been to Hazlemere, but not finding her, had walked on to Boxgrove. He then gave Mr. Dancer, the butler, a letter, requesting him to deliver it to her ladyship, and say that the

bearer, Mr. Hilary St. Ives, begged the favour of an interview with her.

Mr. Dancer bowed most respectfully, and conducting him to the library, left him there, and proceeded on his errand.

Now it chanced, at the moment Mr. Dancer entered the gallery, that Lady Richborough was engaged in conversation with the marquis, and not wishing to disturb her, the butler did not immediately go forward, and while thus stationed attracted May's attention. Fancying he wanted to speak to her, she went towards him, and on hearing his errand hastened down to the library, without staying to make any excuses to the marquis for her sudden disappearance.

She found Hilary standing near the open French window, looking out upon the smooth lawn and the lovely parterres. He bowed formally as he advanced to meet her.

"I am aware that you expected to see Lady Richborough, Mr. St. Ives," she said, saluting him. "I have hurried down before her because I have something to say to you."

"I feel much flattered," he replied, again bowing gravely. "I did not suppose that I lived in your recollection."

"I never forget those I have known and at all cared for," she rejoined; "and there are circumstances connected with your brief stay at Hazlemere which will always make me take an interest in you. I hope you bring good accounts of Colonel Delacombe."

"Alas! no, I am sorry to say," he replied, sadly. "He is detained in Paris by a fresh attack of the low fever which he caught at Rome. He is most anxious to return to England, but his physician will not allow him to move at present. He has, therefore, despatched

me to transact some business for him, and amongst other things has charged me with a letter to Lady Richborough, which must plead my excuse for my present intrusion."


"May I ask if the letter you have brought relates in any way to Mrs. Sutton? You can speak freely to me."

"I am not acquainted with its exact contents, but I know it refers to some important information which the colonel hopes that her ladyship may be instrumental in obtaining from Mrs. Sutton."

"Are you aware that Mrs. Sutton has left Hazlemere?"

"Yes. But Colonel Delacombe thinks that Lady Richborough, or your mother, may enable me to discover her retreat."

"Neither of them can enable you to discover it," rejoined May.



"Then my object is frustrated," he cried, with a look of deep disappointment.

"Perhaps I can help you to find her," said May. "But do not let me raise your hopes too highly. There are difficulties in the way, as you will perceive. I must tell you in confidence, that for some weeks Mrs. Sutton has been living in absolute retirement in a secluded little cottage near the park—with my consent and with my knowledge. But she intended to leave yesterday. She had a motive for her sudden departure, and refused to tell me whither she was going; but I think she will write to me soon."

"Possibly she may not yet have left," cried Hilary, eagerly. "It is important that I should see her without delay. Will you direct me to the cottage?"

"Readily. It is situated on the skirts of the

park, close to the large chesnut grove on the left, which you can see from this window, and is occupied by Widow Perrins. You must tell the old dame that I have sent you, or you will learn nothing from her."

"I will return immediately," said Hilary. "Pray make my excuses to Lady Richborough."

Passing through the open window, he stepped out upon the lawn, and gained the terrace, when a loud halloo checked him, and turning he perceived Mr. Radcliffe.

"What the devil are you doing here, sir?" vociferated that gentleman. "Stop, and give an account of yourself."

Though disinclined to obey, Hilary nevertheless halted.

"Lady Richborough or your daughter will acquaint you with my business here, sir," he remarked, haughtily.

"Ah, indeed! Pray have you seen Miss Radcliffe?"

"I have had that honour, sir," replied the young man. "I must beg you to excuse me just now. I am in haste. On my return, I shall be at your disposal."

"You must not return, sir. I cannot allow you to see my daughter again. I cannot allow you to re-enter the house. Am I sufficiently explicit?—or must I warn you off the premises?"

"Warn me off the premises!" cried Hilary, fiercely. "You now effectually prevent my departure. I do not propose to leave at your bidding. Till this moment I was under the impression that Miss Radcliffe was mistress of Boxgrove, but it seems that you exercise paramount authority here."

"As Miss Radcliffe's father, I am the best judge of those whom she ought to receive: I

disapprove of you, sir, and therefore peremptorily forbid your return. With my sanction you should never have entered the house."

"Mr. Radcliffe," said Hilary, sternly, "I cannot believe you capable of acting in this extraordinary manner without some provocation. Having given you none, I seek in vain for a motive for your excessive rudeness, but as a gentleman you owe me an explanation, and shall render it."

"Perhaps I have spoken too strongly," replied the other, moderating his tone. "Let me, then, say that your presence here is calculated not merely to cause me annoyance, but great pain."

"I understand it now," thought Hilary. "He has discovered the terrible secret."

All anger at once disappeared from the young man's countenance, and gave place to profound sympathy.

"You have said enough, Mr. Radcliffe," he observed. "I will obey you. When you learn my motive for coming here from Lady Richborough, you will not blame me. Let me assure you—since it may be a satisfaction to you to know it—that I did not seek an interview with your daughter. It was by accident that I saw her, and the few words that passed between us referred to Mrs. Sutton, of whom I am in search."

"You are in search of Mrs. Sutton!" cried Mr. Radcliffe, quickly. "With what object?"

"Pardon me, sir. I cannot satisfy your curiosity."

"Have you heard from her? Do you know where she is?"

"I have come here for information respecting her."

"We know nothing of her. She has left

Hazlemere several months ago. I have made many fruitless attempts to find her."

"Perhaps I may be more fortunate," said the young man, raising his hat. "I wish you good day, sir."

Mr. Radcliffe did not attempt to stop him, for at the moment May and Lady Richborough issued forth from the library window.

"What have you done with Mr. St. Ives, sir?" said her ladyship, as she came up. "He has brought me a letter which requires an answer."

"He will be back presently," observed May.

"I don't think he will," said Mr. Radcliffe. "I shall be very much surprised if he makes his appearance here again."

"What have you said to him, papa?" cried May, in consternation.

"Quite enough to prevent his return," remarked Mr. Radcliffe, drily. "I have a decided objec-

tion to the young man. Besides, his appearance at this juncture is excessively inopportune."

"Yes, I quite admit that," observed Myrtille. "And perhaps it is as well he is gone. He might have caused some unpleasantness. You must really take your daughter to task, Mr. Radcliffe. She has behaved infamously, and if the marquis were not the most amiable creature alive, and devotedly attached to her, he could not fail to have taken offence."

"What have I done?" said May.

"Everything in your power to defeat our plans. You almost show the marquis that you are indifferent to him. You will not grant him a tête-à-tête. You allow that grand brouillon, Oswald, to interrupt him, just as he is making a declaration; and when I have set matters straight you run away from him altogether."

"My excuse is that I wished to speak to Mr. St. Ives," replied May.

“Will your ladyship now blame me for dismissing the young man so unceremoniously?” cried Mr. Radcliffe.

“Far from it. I think you acted very properly—very judiciously. Really, my love, we have had rather too much nonsense this morning. It is time to be a little sensible. Perhaps you may not have any very strong liking for the Marquis of Hartlepool—nor is it absolutely necessary that you should be in love with him—but you must allow that he is very agreeable, and if not positively handsome, is the next thing to it. He has a thousand recommendations, which I could enumerate if I had time, but they may be all summed up in the fact that he has the power of making you a marchioness. We all desire the alliance—papa, mamma, grandpapa, myself—we all urge it—and if you prove rebellious, we shall insist—yes, insist upon compliance with our

wishes. Have I said more than I ought, Mr. Radcliffe?"

"Not a word," he rejoined. "I hoped that a very different reception would have been given to the marquis." Then turning to May, he added authoritatively, "If you refuse him, I will never forgive you."

Disregarding her entreating looks, he walked away.

"You must extricate me from this dilemma, Myrtilla," cried May. "I will not be forced into a marriage against my inclinations."

"Don't expect the slightest sympathy from me, my love. I am dead against you. You are in no dilemma. Your course is perfectly clear; and everybody, except Oswald and his mother, will blame you if you do not take it. But here comes the marquis. Attend to what your papa has said to you."

Presently, the Marquis of Hartlepool came up accompanied by Mrs. Radcliffe and Mr. Thornton. May was obliged to offer some apologies for quitting him so abruptly in the portrait-gallery, and though annoyed by the treatment he had experienced, he was easily appeased.

Resolved to bring the affair to an immediate issue, Lady Richborough suggested an extension of their promenade, and they strolled on in the direction of the yew-tree alley.

To prevent May's escape Myrtille took her arm, and very soon engaged the marquis in a lively discourse, which enabled him indirectly to renew his suit. They were left to themselves, for Mrs. Radcliffe and grandpapa, who comprehended Myrtille's tactics, discreetly kept back.

Unquestionably there is something in a dim yew-tree alley favourable to utterances of love, but the presence of a third person is not calcu-

lated to heighten their effect. The marquis's protestations being intercepted by Myrtille, failed to move May, and though her silence might have been construed into assent, her looks betrayed her indifference. They had nearly reached the further end of the alley, when a tall dark figure suddenly appeared before them. Recognising the unwelcome intruder, Lady Richborough endeavoured to get rid of him.

"Pray go to the house, Mr. St. Ives," she cried. "I will join you almost immediately. I want to talk to you about the colonel's letter."

"Your ladyship must excuse me," he said "After what has passed between Mr. Radcliffe and myself, I cannot re-enter the house."

"Have you seen her?" inquired May, in a low tone.

"No," he replied. "I merely returned to let you know that my search has been unsuccessful."

"I am so sorry I cannot aid you further," she rejoined. "But you must not go till I have had some explanation with papa."

"You are very kind. I cannot remain longer."

And he turned to depart, but was arrested by the Marquis of Hartlepool.

"Stop! stop, my dear fellow," cried the latter.

"You shall not go without shaking hands with me. Not expecting to see you here, I did not recognise you at first. How are you, and how is my worthy friend, the colonel?"

"Do you know Mr. St. Ives?" exclaimed May, surprised.

"Know him! I ought to do. He is my preserver."

"Your preserver! What do you mean, marquis?"

"Yes, I repeat, my preserver. He saved my life last winter at Rome. I will tell you the story in two words."

"Not now, I beg," said Hilary.

"Yes, now," cried Myrtille.

"Thus it happened. One moonlight night, during a visit to the Coliseum, I was set upon by brigands, who had concealed themselves in the passages. My dastardly valet-de-place abandoned me, and I should certainly have been assassinated but for the gallant assistance rendered me by Mr. St. Ives. There were three of them—three athletic ruffians—and he had only a stout stick against their stilettoes. But he beat them off till the arrival of the sentinel."

"You greatly overrate the service, my dear marquis," said Hilary.

"Impossible to overrate it," replied the other. "You have laid me under an eternal obligation. But you have not answered my inquiries about the colonel. Where is he?"

"Still in Paris. I shall have good news for

him when I go back. It will delight him to hear of the alliance you are about to form. Accept my congratulations."

"Would I were in a position to accept them," replied the marquis, glancing at May.

"I fear I have been indiscreet," observed Hilary to Lady Richborough.

"A little so, perhaps," she rejoined. "Your appearance was rather mal à propos. But the affair may be considered settled."

"I am glad to hear it," said Hilary. "Adieu, my dear marquis. I need not wish you success, for I know your cause is won."

And bowing around, he departed.

VIII.

HOW HILARY FOUND THE PERSON HE SOUGHT.

HILARY did not leave the neighbourhood of Boxgrove. After a little debate with himself, he returned to the cottage, and asked the old dame whether she could accommodate him for the night. At first she hesitated, but at length said he might have the room which had been occupied by her late lodger, and took him to it. It was very simply furnished, but scrupulously clean. In one corner there was a chest, which imme-

diately caught his eye, and he felt sure it belonged to Mrs. Sutton. On questioning the good dame as to the state of her larder, he found that it would be necessary to seek a meal elsewhere. Luckily, this was easy of accomplishment. Within half an hour's walk, there was a well-known inn, much resorted to by visitors from town on account of its picturesque situation, and at this comfortable hotel he knew from former experience he could get a good dinner. Accordingly, he set out thither.

Having dined very satisfactorily, he came forth, and was standing at the door of the inn, conversing with the landlord, when a well-appointed barouche came in sight. It was Mrs. Radcliffe's carriage, and with her were Lady Richborough and the Marquis of Hartlepool.

No sooner did the marquis descry Hilary than he stopped the carriage, and beckoning to him,

said, in a low voice, as the young man came up,

“You may now really congratulate me. The thing positively is settled.”

We are not sure that the announcement did not cause a sharp pang in the breast of the hearer, but he forced a smile, and declared he was delighted.

“I owe everything to Lady Richborough,” pursued the marquis. “She has won me my bride.”

“Expedited matters a little, that is all, my dear marquis,” observed Myrtille. “The wooing might have been more tedious without me.”

“And might not have ended as it has done,” cried the marquis.

“Her ladyship has a vast deal more influence with May than I have, so I would not interfere,” observed Mrs. Radcliffe.

“Well, I am quite willing to take all the credit you give me,” said Myrtila, smiling. “Don’t you think I have reason to feel proud of my success, Mr. St. Ives?”

“Indeed I do,” he replied. “But I did not suppose the marquis required any advocacy.”

“You are very much mistaken, my dear fellow,” cried the other. “I almost began to despair, when Lady Richborough put in a word, and all difficulties vanished as if by magic.”

“Her ladyship must be an enchantress—I have always thought so,” remarked Hilary, gallantly.

“I am so sorry we can’t take you on with us to Hazlemere,” remarked Mrs. Radcliffe. “Nothing would have given me greater pleasure than to see you there, had circumstances permitted.”

“Don’t say another word, I entreat,” rejoined the young man. “I am overjoyed by the intelligence I have just received, and hope, ere long,

to have some good news to communicate to you in return. Mr. Radcliffe's prejudices against me will soon, I trust, be removed."

With this he bowed and retired, and the carriage went on.

In asserting that he was overjoyed, Hilary had belied his feelings. The intelligence had greatly disturbed him. He had not recovered when Mr. Malham drove up in his gig, and, alighting, greeted him cordially.

"What, are you come to look at us again, Mr. St. Ives?" said the surgeon. "We have had many changes since I saw you last, and more are likely to occur. We have lost your excellent nurse, Mrs. Sutton."

"So it seems. Can you tell me what has become of her?" asked Hilary.

"I wish I could. But I have no idea where she is gone. I never could understand why she left Hazlemere, but the house has not been like

itself since. Mrs. Trapp, the present housekeeper, is not to be compared to her. Mrs. Sutton, as you may remember, had quite the air of a lady. It was her own fault, I'm persuaded, that she didn't marry well."

"Yes, I've heard so," remarked the landlord, who was standing by. "She was certainly a superior woman."

"Superior? Yes, I believe you. She was superior to any one in this neighbourhood. I'm afraid we shall never have her back."

"I'm by no means sure that she ain't back already," remarked the landlord.

"What do you mean, Crowder?" demanded the surgeon.

"Why, Frank Mowatt, one of the Boxgrove keepers, who was here just now, told me he saw her this very morning, soon after daylight, near the park, and other folks have seen her."

"Not likely, that," cried Mr. Malham, in-

credulously. "Mr. Radcliffe would have heard of her return, and so should I, if there were any truth in the report."

"Well, Mowatt declared he saw her, that's all I know," remarked Crowder.

"Send him to me," cried the surgeon. "I'll give him a guinea if he can satisfy me she has come back."

Nodding to Hilary, he then entered the house with the landlord.

Having already paid his reckoning, the young man walked away at a leisurely pace, meditating upon the information he had thus accidentally obtained.

The Fox and Hounds, where Hilary had dined, is situated at the foot of a hill which forms part of the same range as Boxgrove, being divided from the latter by a lovely valley, through which runs a celebrated fishing-stream. The valley abounds in

fine timber of various kinds, and on the banks of the river, and close to an old stone bridge that crosses it within a bow-shot of the inn, grows a row of tall Lombardy poplars.

Viewed from this bridge the scene, which comprehended the woody heights of Boxgrove and the ancient mansion that crowned them, was perfect. The noble park and the stately mansion had a strange fascination for Hilary. While sketching in the park, he had familiarised himself with the locality, and stamped its beauties so forcibly on his memory that they had ever afterwards haunted him. As he now gazed upon the enchanting prospect from the little bridge, the temptation to revisit these fair sylvan scenes was irresistible.

Descending from the bridge to the meadows, and following the course of the river for a few hundred yards, he struck into a footpath, which brought him to the outskirts of the park, and

clearing the pales, he was presently in the midst of the thicket that clothed this side of the hill.

Familiar with the spot, he knew where to seek to strike towards the path that led to the uplands, and pushed on without the slightest misgiving. The thicket had charms of its own that might have delayed him had he not wished to reach the brow of the hill before the shades of evening, now rapidly coming on, should obscure the beauties of the view. It was an object with him, therefore, to gain the footpath as expeditiously as possible, but he failed in his design, for the intricacies of the wood were more difficult than he imagined, and when at length he extricated himself it had become almost dark. Still he went on, and scaled the hill-side with rapid steps. The uplands were quickly reached, but the beauties of the view were shrouded in gloom. The ancient mansion was distinguishable, but only as a dark mass. He

walked on in that direction, but though sorely tempted did not enter the garden. However, he remained for a short time in the vicinity of the house, as if spell-bound.

Lights gleamed from some of the windows. Was May there, or had she joined the party at Hazlemere?

Suddenly he heard footsteps, and perceived a female figure moving quickly along the terrace. His heart beat violently at the thought that it might be May. Without considering the consequences he hurried towards the garden-gate, and reached it at the very moment that it was opened by the person he had seen.

The person was Mrs. Sutton.

She knew him, and did not manifest the surprise that might have been expected at so strange a meeting.

She would not allow him to enter into any

explanation, but bidding him follow her, speeded towards a clump of trees that crowned a knoll at some little distance from the garden-gate. On arriving there, she stopped, and thus addressed him:

“I know all—why you are in search of me—what passed between you and Miss Radcliffe this morning, and what subsequently occurred. I know where you will lodge to-night, and concluding I should find you at Dame Perrins’s cottage I was going thither to speak to you.”

“Why give up your purpose? Let us go there at once,” said Hilary.

“No,” she replied. “I have little to say now, and I would rather say it here, beneath these trees, where the gloom shrouds my features, than in the cottage. The time is not yet arrived when we can talk freely together—when we can look each other in the face. You have to learn who and what I am—and till you have acquired that

knowledge, a meeting like the present, where the darkness befriends me, is best for both of us."

"If you have a secret to reveal to me, this is a fitting opportunity for its disclosure," said Hilary.

"Not now," she rejoined. "Though I earnestly desire to tell you all, I shrink from the task. You must not—you cannot learn the secret from my lips. I should die in the effort to reveal it to you."

"Must I then remain in ignorance of a matter which is of vital importance to me to learn?" he asked.

"No," she rejoined. "Nothing shall be withheld from you. I have written down a statement, which would have been delivered to you after my death, but which you can now read. You will find it in the chest which you may

have noticed in my little chamber in the cottage. Here is the key. When you have read the story of my life, you will know what to think of me, and as you think of me, can act. We may meet again, or we may not. Do not be influenced by any feeling of pity for me. I do not want pity. I want love—yes, love! If you detest me, as you may do after you have learnt the truth, let us never meet again on earth. I will shun you, and you must shun me. But if you will feel that, in spite of all my errors, you can love me, come here to-morrow night at this hour.”

“I will come,” cried Hilary, earnestly.

“Make no rash promise,” she rejoined. “You have not yet read my story. I am staying with May Radcliffe—but you must not come to the house. At nine to-morrow night you will find me beneath these trees. Farewell!”

And without waiting for any reply, she hurried back to the garden.

Greatly perplexed and agitated, Hilary made no attempt to follow her, but after a while took his way through the chesnut grove to the cottage.

When he was gone, two men, who had been lurking behind the trees during the interview, came from their hiding-place.

"Shall we knock him on the head as we did once afore, and get the key of the chest?" observed one of them.

"Tut! that would spoil all," cried his companion. "We don't want the papers. We can frighten Madam Sutton without 'em. We shall find her here to-morrow night. Let us go and reconnoitre the cottage."

And they moved off slowly in the direction that Hilary had taken.

Dame Perrins was in no very good humour.

She had been long expecting her guest, and wondered he should stay out so long. It was not more than nine o'clock, but the old dame kept good hours. Her little tea equipage was on the table. The kettle was singing on the hob, and she set about preparing a cup of tea.

All at once she suspended her task, and looking at him mysteriously, and nodding her head, remarked :

“Mrs. Sutton has been here.”

“I know it,” replied Hilary. “I have just parted with her. She has given me the key of her chest.”

“In that case, it be all right,” observed the old dame. “She told me she wanted to see you to-night, and I thought she might come.”

Having made her guest as comfortable as she could, and finding he had no further occasion for her services, the old dame locked and bolted

the door, bade him good night, and retired to an inner room.

Left to himself, Hilary spent some little time in reflection. Though his curiosity was greatly excited, and though he could gratify it immediately, he hesitated, because he felt assured, from the terms in which Mrs. Sutton had spoken, that some painful revelation was about to be made to him.

At last he took a candle, and mounted to the little chamber. How quiet it looked, and the neat little bed seemed to invite him to rest, but he had no thoughts of sleep. With a hand trembling with excitement, he unlocked the chest.

It contained several documents, bundles of old letters tied together, with other matters, but the first thing that caught his eye was a packet sealed with black wax.

Not doubting for a moment that this was in-

tended for him, he took possession of it, and, descending to the little parlour, sat down and broke the seals.

The manuscript which then met his gaze was penned in a firm, bold, almost masculine hand, and showed no traces of the anxiety under which the writer must have laboured.

IX.

MRS. SUTTON'S HISTORY.

As this sad story will not be perused by him for whom it is narrated until the unhappy writer is no more, she implores his pity and forgiveness. Willingly would she spare him these painful details, but he ought to know them, and she cannot depart in peace without lightening her breast by a full confession of her crimes.

Would I had died when I was quite young.
How many years of bitter remorse should I have

escaped. When I look back to that season of innocence and happiness, I can scarcely believe that so fair a child can have become the wretched, despairing woman who now pens these lines. Yet even in that child's breast there were seeds of evil, which, not being crushed, ripened into poisonous fruit. Excitable, wayward, capricious, not devoid of generosity, not unforgiving, but passionate—such was I as a young girl.

My mother died while I was almost an infant. She was very beautiful, and rendered my poor father extremely jealous, and I fear I must have inherited some of her qualities, for she was passionate in the extreme, and vindictive as passionate.

Personally, I believe, I resembled her—at least, when I was very young—though she was far more beautiful than I could ever pretend to be. But it was this resemblance that made my father

so doatingly fond of me—so blind to my faults. Uncontrolled as a child, I became unmanageable as I grew towards womanhood, and my father perceived the sad consequences of his excessive indulgence to me when too late.

I was born in Jamaica—at Kingston. My mother was a native of the Island, but of English extraction; my father was of an ancient family, and brother of a baronet. He was a West India merchant, but did not prosper. He was indolent, and not a man of business—very hospitable, and very extravagant. He left me to the care of my nurse, Bonita, an Octaroon, who was devotedly attached to me, and supplied the place of a mother.

Nursed in luxury, I had scarcely a desire ungratified. My father studied every whim, and I was treated by those around me as if I had been a little princess. My education was neg-

lected, but I was quick enough, and learnt many things that I ought not to have done. In short, I was very badly brought up, as could not fail to be the case under such circumstances.

In that warm climate young persons arrive early at maturity, and before I was sixteen, my charms—such as they were—were sufficiently developed to attract many admirers, and I received several offers of marriage from sons of rich merchants and planters, but would listen to none of them. I could not foresee the future, or I should have married then.

Though I did not know it at the time, my father was in difficulties. His large plantations and his very residence were mortgaged to a wealthy merchant, named Osborne. A widower, but without family, and nearly as old as my own father, Mr. Osborne was violently enamoured of me, and determined to make me his wife. I de-

tested him, and did not scruple to show my dislike, but he did not mind that. He gave my father clearly to understand that my hand was to be the price of his forbearance towards him. But though menaced by the seizure of all his property, and aware that Osborne, if thwarted, was quite capable of any vindictive measures, my father would not sacrifice me thus. He had written home, and had some hopes of obtaining from his brother the means of relieving himself from the frightful position in which he was placed. But in the interval Mr. Osborne became impatient, and declared he would not brook longer delay. In vain my father urged that he must first gain my affections. He treated the suggestion with contempt, and my poor father, driven to his wit's ends, was obliged to appeal to me.

Then for the first time I comprehended his position, and saw my own peril. But my detesta-

tion of Mr. Osborne was increased, and I declared I would rather die than wed him. With tears in his eyes, my father besought me to have some consideration for him, but I remained inflexible. However, in order to gain time, I consented to permit Mr. Osborne's addresses, and gave him some slight show of encouragement. This was a hard task to one of my impetuous nature, but I fulfilled it with tolerable success, consoling myself with the thought of the scorn with which I would requite him anon.

At last the mail, so anxiously expected, arrived, but it did not bring the hoped-for assistance from my uncle. He could not, or would not, help my father—at least, to the extent required. But he sent out a young man, who had been a clerk in a mercantile house, to assist him in winding up his affairs.

John Bromley, the young clerk, was very shrewd and intelligent, and, moreover, very handsome. He

pleased me better than any one whom I had seen in Jamaica. On being made acquainted with the exact state of my father's affairs, which was worse than he had been led to anticipate, Bromley evinced great alarm, and at once stated that the only chance was an arrangement with Mr. Osborne. My father then explained to him the condition exacted by his creditor, and that no other arrangement was possible. I was present at the time, and the young man glanced at me before making an observation. Reading my repugnance to the plan in my looks, he shaped his answer accordingly.

"It is quite clear you are in Mr. Osborne's power, sir," he said to my father; "but were I in your place, I would let him do his worst, rather than yield my daughter to him."

"I cannot help it," was the reply, accompanied by a groan. "I must yield to circumstances."

"Before you take any decisive step, sir," said

Bromley, "let me consider the matter, and see if I cannot discover some remedy."

My father shook his head, but as I appealed to him, he agreed to wait. As the young man quitted the room, he said in a low tone to me, "I will save you, if I can."

In the few days that followed I saw a good deal of young Bromley, and soon found that he had fallen desperately in love with me, nor did I disguise from him that he had excited a corresponding feeling in my breast. He implored me in the most passionate terms not to surrender myself to the hateful man, who would purchase me as he would a slave, but to resist my father's commands, and, if he remained obdurate, to fly. I half promised assent, but had no serious intention of complying.

Seeing no chance of escape, I consulted Bonita. After hearing all I had to say, she reflected,


and then declared there was but one means of liberation, but I might not like to have recourse to it. I eagerly caught at the suggestion. Be it what it might, I would adopt it. With a look that frightened me, but did not shake my purpose, she then said that she would apply for a charm to an Obeah woman. I knew what that meant, but did not forbid her.

I have now arrived at a period of my history on which I cannot look back without horror and the deepest remorse. I can offer nothing in extenuation of my guilty conduct, but I am amazed at it.

Accompanied by Bonita, I paid a stealthy visit to the hut of the terrible woman who had promised me deliverance, and she told me that her most potent charms would be ineffectual against my persecutor. Only in one way could I free myself from him, and as she said this she held up in her yellow, skinny hand a small phial, adding that a

few drops, mingled with wine, or any other drink, would do the business. I did not wait to question her further, but, giving her my purse, which she thrust into her pouch with a fiendish grin, hurried away with Bonita. I allowed myself no time for reflection. My blood seemed on fire, and fierce thoughts agitated my breast. My visit to the Obeah woman's hut seemed to have changed my nature. Had she dealings with evil spirits, as was asserted, and had one of them taken possession of me?

Mr. Osborne was at the residencia that night. He had dined with my father, and I left them sipping their claret in the verandah, while I paid my stolen visit to the Obeah woman. Bromley was with them. My absence had not been noticed, but he had been aware of it, for he knew my errand. He regarded me anxiously as I reappeared, and I knew what his looks meant to



convey. Little doubt indeed was left me on the subject, for Mr. Osborne rose from his seat, and, with a triumphant look, told me that I should soon be his bride. He would have embraced me, but I thrust him back with loathing, and any lingering hesitation I might have felt was then removed. He was greatly enraged, and vented his displeasure on my father. I took advantage of this moment to whisper a few words to Bromley, who turned very pale, and, to hide his trepidation, walked to a little distance in the court. My father and Mr. Osborne had just lighted their cigars, when our black servant, Diego, brought in coffee and liqueurs, leaving me to serve them, as was my custom, and I went into the room for that purpose.

Now was my opportunity. Into the cup of coffee which I designed for Mr. Osborne, unperceived by any one, save Bromley, who was

watching my movements from the court, I poured a few drops from the phial. I then handed the cup to Mr. Osborne, but he was still angry with me, and declined it. He was not destined to die thus. Fate had elected another victim. My father bade me give him the coffee. I would have retreated, but he snatched the cup from me.

Horror of horrors! he had swallowed the poisonous mixture ere I could prevent him.

I screamed and fainted. Bonita rushed into the room, and, amidst the utmost confusion, bore me off to my own chamber. They thought I had trodden on a snake. When I recovered, I sought for the phial, but it was gone. Bonita had removed it, or I would have ended my anguish at once. No discovery had as yet been made. Mr. Osborne had departed, stating that he should come betimes on the morrow with the marriage contract. My father had retired to

rest, but I was resolved to see him, and make a full confession of my guilt, and, in spite of all Bonita's attempts to dissuade me, I repaired to his chamber. He was reclining on his couch, reading. I flung myself on my knees before him, and implored his forgiveness. At first he thought me distracted, but the truth soon forced itself upon him. Overcome for the moment, he fell back on the bed, and I was rushing out for assistance, but he detained me.

"I know the effect of this poison," he said, with a composure that astonished me. "There is no remedy; but the effect will not be immediate, and will give time to make arrangements for your safety, for on my death, which is inevitable, suspicions are certain to attach to you."

I told him I would not survive him, but he stopped me.

"Do not add another crime to that which you

have unintentionally committed," he said. "My sole consolation will be that you will escape. I have prayed for death, but I did not wish it to come in this way. A packet sails for England to-morrow. You must sail by it."

"And leave you? Impossible!"

"You must go," he said, solemnly and sternly. "I must be obeyed now. Your presence would double the pangs of death. Seek not to move me with entreaties. I am inflexible. Bromley will take charge of you. I intended to send him back by this packet, though with very different tidings. Bonita shall also go with you. Make your preparations to-night. You must be off before Mr. Osborne can learn anything of the plan."

Again I besought him to allow me to stay. Again he sternly refused.

"As you hope for my forgiveness you will obey me," he said. "You have the night before

you. Employ it, so that you can go on board at daybreak. I shall not feel easy till you are gone. Then I can die in peace.”

I wept—I prayed—I clung to him—I bedewed his hands with my tears—but I could not move him.

All was done as he enjoined. How he passed the night after I quitted him, I know not, but when I tapped at his door, an hour before daybreak, to tell him all was ready, he was fully attired. At that trying moment, when I felt ready to sink from the weight of anguish, he was perfectly composed. His countenance was serene in expression, though deathly pale, for he had already begun to feel the effects of the poisonous draught. But he bore himself so firmly and manfully, that I felt ashamed of my own weakness, and strove to imitate him, though I thought my heart would burst with the effort.

Never had I loved him so dearly as then. To

say that I would have willingly died for him is simply to repeat the supplication I had addressed a hundred times that night to Heaven. His firmness never deserted him till the parting moment came. He had pardoned me—had blessed me—had bade me an eternal farewell, and I was about to leave the room, when I saw him reel and fall back on the couch. I rushed towards him, but he motioned me away.

“Go! go!” he exclaimed. “It is nothing. It will pass. Farewell for ever!”

Many months afterwards, when I had reached England, I learnt that he was found lifeless by his bedside.

Before proceeding, I must state that Colonel Delacombe is even now, as far as I am aware, wholly unacquainted with the portion of my history which I have just related.

I suffered much during my passage to England, but more in mind than body, and never ceased to reproach myself with the crime I had committed. But for Bonita's watchful care I believe I should have died. Bromley, also, strove to mitigate my distress. We were constantly together, and his passion for me increased. But mine had declined, for I began to fear him. He wished to marry me immediately on our arrival at Southampton, but to this proposition I would not listen, and he became angry and suspicious, declared that I was trifling with him, and hinted that I was in his power, and must comply. This menace changed any lingering feeling of regard into positive aversion. But I avoided a quarrel, and resolved to get rid of him when we landed.

How I escaped from him at Southampton I need not relate, but I got to London with Bonita.

Then I was safe. I had previously resolved not to make myself known to my uncle, and if he heard of my arrival in England, Bromley could not tell him where to find me. But I had no apprehensions on this score, and though Bromley made diligent search for me, it was not till long afterwards that he was successful.

For some months I lived in obscure lodgings in Kensington. Bonita passed as my mother.

Tired of this life, which appeared wretched indeed after the luxurious existence I had led in Jamaica, I should have presented myself to my uncle, had I dared to do so. But I thought the haughty baronet would cast me off, and Bonita was of the same opinion. However, I emerged from my seclusion, and one day when walking in the Park, accompanied by Bonita, I attracted the attention of a very handsome young officer. He made some excuse for addressing me, and

though I received his advances very coldly he would not be dismissed. Having ascertained where I lived, he contrived to meet me again.

Other meetings followed, and Seymour Delacombe—for he it was—became desperately enamoured of me—so desperately, that he proposed marriage, though he supposed my condition far inferior to his own. Subsequently, when the violence of his passion had abated, he reproached me with having duped him, but it is needless to say the accusation was false.

When Bonita, whom he believed to be my mother, told him in a decided tone that our intimacy must cease, he became half frantic vowed that his intentions were honourable, and that he meant to wed me.


He kept his word—though not without hesitation and delay—and we were privately married.

Alas! the union was fraught with misery

No sooner was the step taken than he repented it. I had left London by his desire, and resided at a little cottage in the neighbourhood of Bath. Bonita was always with me. Ashamed of me, irritated with himself for having made—as he deemed—such a dreadful *mésalliance*, my husband visited his anger on me.

I bore his reproaches at first with patience, but my pride soon took fire, and painful scenes occurred between us. When he taunted me with my lowly origin, I could have retorted that my family was better than his own, but I forbore, as it would necessitate other explanations, and I would not allow Bonita to reply.

Our quarrels grew more frequent—more fierce. After the first few months he rarely came near me. My life was now a burthen. But I had a hope of brighter days. I expected to become a mother.



It was about this time, when I was driven into a state bordering upon frenzy, that my evil genius again appeared before me. By dint of constant inquiries Bromley had traced me out. He had learnt that I was married, and was aware of my present unhappiness. He came under the pretence of offering me advice and assistance, and I was foolish enough to give him welcome. Bonita warned me of my danger, but I would not listen to her counsel.



Bromley took up his abode at Bath, in order to be near me, and spent almost every evening at the cottage. Utterly neglected by my husband, and having no other society, he helped me to pass the weary hours, but I did not foresee—as I ought to have done—how my conduct would be misconstrued.

Mischief-makers reported what was going on to Seymour.

One evening he arrived unexpectedly and found Bromley with me. Thrusting him indignantly from the house, he turned his fury upon me ; heaping upon me every opprobrious epithet that his rage dictated. He charged me with having dishonoured him with a man who had been my paramour before marriage.

Stung beyond endurance by his galling words, and no longer mistress of myself, I snatched up a knife, and should have plunged it to his heart, but, thank Heaven! I was spared that crime. Bonita flung herself between us, and tried to obtain a hearing, but in vain. He was deaf to her entreaties.

After such a scene reconciliation was impossible; and I was not surprised to receive a letter from my husband, informing me that he was going to Ireland with his regiment, and would see me no more. At the same time he enclosed a sum



of money, stating that the like amount would be paid me quarterly.

I wrote to tell him that he had wronged me by his suspicions, but he did not deign to answer my letter. Perhaps he had heard that I had been indiscreet enough to continue my intimacy with Bromley.

I will pass over several wretched months. I would fain blot them from my memory. My child was born, and I gave him my father's name of Alberic. I wrote to Seymour imploring forgiveness for his son's sake.

My letter, like the one I had formerly written, remained unanswered, but he sent a confidential agent to me—a certain Mr. Courtenay. This person's manner was kindly, and he displayed much feeling. He told me his instructions were to remove the child, and that if I refused to deliver it up to him no further allowance would be made

me. He gave me a solemn assurance that the child would be well cared for, but added that I could not be allowed to see it. I rejected the proposition. But alas! I was weak and wicked enough to yield to Bromley's persuasions, and suffered my little Alberic to be taken from me.

The punishment of my heartless and unnatural conduct was not long delayed. Bonita was absent at the time, but when she returned she bitterly reproached me. From that moment she conceived a violent antipathy to Bromley, and sought to drive him from the house.

Such an existence, as I then led, embittered as it was by Bonita's ceaseless reproaches, was unsupportable. Bromley, who thought his life in danger, urged me to fly with him, and the fatal influence he had now acquired over me, compelled me to assent.

Step by step I went downward.

Before my departure I wrote a few hurried lines to Bonita, bidding her farewell, and enclosing her a sum of money.

No fixed plans. No precise destination. Our journey soon came to an end.

We were crossing the Severn in the ferry-boat from the Old Passage to Chepstow. A gale was blowing at the time. The boat was upset, and all within her perished except myself. I escaped by miracle, but none knew that I had escaped.

My marvellous preservation from a watery grave suggested a plan to me, and I resolved to act upon it. Lost to the world—believed to be drowned, I would begin life anew, under a new name.

Perhaps I might have returned to poor Bonita. But my letter had killed her.

When she found that I had abandoned her, she had done with life. She had brought the phial of

poison with her from Jamaica, and the moment was come to have recourse to it.

In the part I had resolved to enact, I ran no risk of detection. Few knew me in England, and the few who did were unacquainted with my real history. My uncle had never seen me. I had no fear of my husband. He would not doubt that I had perished, when he read the account of the disaster in the Severn. To one of my temperament there was a strange satisfaction in having severed all ties. Freed from Bromley—divorced as if by death from a husband who hated me, I rejoiced at my deliverance. But, on the other hand, I had lost the truest and best friend I had on earth. I had also lost my child.

For good or ill, the step was taken. I could not, and would not, retreat.

I took the name of Sutton, and described myself as a widow.

How my pride revolted against the humble situation I was compelled in the first instance to accept. I, who had had a dozen servants to wait upon me, whose slightest look was obeyed—I, the niece of one of the proudest men in England—to become nurse to the children of a woman whom I felt to be my inferior in every respect! I could scarcely submit to the degradation. Yet I discharged my duties so well, that I kept the situation for nearly three years, and pleased my mistress so much, that she recommended me to Mrs. Radcliffe of Hazlemere, into whose service I next entered.

I was then two-and-twenty, but I looked five years older. Such beauty as I once possessed had fled. My manner likewise was changed. All my natural gaiety had forsaken me. From the first

my new mistress took a great fancy to me, and was curious to learn my history. I told her I was a widow, and that my married life had been unhappy, but I avoided entering into details, and she was considerate enough not to press me further.

Mrs. Radcliffe was in delicate health, threatened with consumption, and I nursed her with so much care, that I may venture to affirm that I saved her life. I had now become indispensable to her, was promoted to the post of housekeeper, and the entire management of the establishment devolved upon me. Weak, vain, indolent as she was, it was not difficult to gain an ascendancy over Mrs. Radcliffe.

My authority in the house became almost absolute, for Mr. Radcliffe, the best-hearted and kindest of men, but also one of the easiest, never interfered with me.

Having acted as nurse to May, I had won the

affections of that charming child, and her attachment to me helped in some measure to fill up the terrible void in my heart.

Thus my position was completely assured, and I might have been happy, if I could but have obliterated the past. But the undying worm gnawed incessantly at my heart. Though hidden from the world, I could not fly from myself. My rest was broken by dreadful dreams. I saw my father with a stern reproachful look—Bonita—Bromley—but strange to say! for a time I thought not of Seymour or of my little Alberic.

Though Mrs. Radcliffe's weak and frivolous character always inspired me with contempt, I entertained a certain regard for her, till one day she confidentially informed me that she nourished a secret affection for one who ought to have been her husband, and she showed me some of his letters.

Judge my surprise—judge my consternation—

when I found these letters were from Seymour Delacombe. A strange feeling of jealousy was aroused. Though I knew that when Seymour made love to Esther Thornton, he deemed himself released by death from his marriage ties, my jealousy of her, my anger against him, were not lessened by that consideration.

And these feelings were kept alive—nay, increased—because, having enlisted my sympathy, as she deemed, Mrs. Radcliffe constantly talked to me of her old lover. He had given her his miniature, which she now produced, and hung it above the chimney-piece in her boudoir. There it was constantly before me.

I did not alter my demeanour towards her—I contrived to maintain a semblance of respect—but I was often on the point of betraying myself by an explosion of jealous rage, and I resolved to have revenge for the torture she unconsciously inflicted upon me.

It would not be true to say that the feelings that I once entertained for Seymour were revived by this constant reference to him, but it brought him to my mind, and awakened my maternal affections, which had so long lain dormant. I could not rest till I had ascertained what had become of my little Alberic. From inquiries, which I caused to be made, I learnt that he was with Mr. Courtenay at Exeter, and satisfied that he was well cared for I was perforce content.

Time went on, and for many years nothing occurred to disturb my fancied security.

All apprehensions of detection had long since ceased, when one day I received a letter that filled me with alarm. It was from an elder brother of Bromley, whom I had never seen, but whom I had heard described as unprincipled and unscrupulous. Daniel Bromley knew my unhappy story, for John had been imprudent enough to reveal it to him.

At the time of the disastrous accident on the Severn, Daniel Bromley had just sailed for America, and I think it was John's intention to join him there. Hearing of his brother's death, Daniel went on to San Francisco, and lost all the money he gained in gambling and low dissipation.

After a prolonged absence, and many disreputable adventures, he returned to this country in a wretched plight.

From the newspaper report of the accident he had been led to believe that I had perished at the same time as his brother, but on making inquiries on the spot he discovered that the body had never been found, and his suspicions being aroused he made further investigations that eventually led to my discovery.

No sooner did the villain satisfy himself on this point, than he wrote the letter I have men-

tioned, and threatened to reveal all the details of my early life, with which he had become acquainted owing to John's indiscretion, my unhappy marriage, and every subsequent incident of my career, unless he was paid handsomely for his silence.

I had no alternative but compliance, and his extortionate demands being incessant, I could no longer supply them.

Rendered desperate I defied him, and he then informed me that he should go to Mr. Courtenay, and deposit with him a sealed packet containing certain documents, to be despatched to India for Colonel Delacombe, if not reclaimed within three months. I disbelieved this menace, but it proved to be correct, for the packet eventually fell into my own hands.

It contained fearful evidences against me. I found within it all the letters I had written to the

villain himself, together with a statement which he had drawn up, charging me with parricide. He endeavoured to substantiate the horrible accusation by letters from his brother John, and extracts from old Jamaica newspapers, in which mention was made of the suspicious circumstances under which my father died, as well as of my sudden disappearance.

The false villain likewise accused me of poisoning Bonita.

Death at last liberated me from the relentless extortioner, and I was allowed some years of comparative tranquillity. With such a heavy load of guilt on my soul, I could not have a tranquil mind, but I was no longer in constant dread of detection and disgrace.

Let me now turn to May Radcliffe.

Sweeter creature never breathed. Loving her as I did with infinitely more affection than her own mother, I became jealous of her as she threatened to deprive me of my power. I despised myself for the unworthy feeling, but I indulged it nevertheless. A perpetual conflict was going on in my breast between love for the dear girl, and dread of the sway she was sure to gain over her father, and which might be exercised to my disadvantage.

My secret aim was to get her early married, and I therefore encouraged an attachment that appeared to be springing up between her and her cousin Oswald. But I was foiled, for though Oswald was passionately enamoured of her, she was quite indifferent to him.

I was deliberately pursuing this plan, when an event occurred that turned my thoughts into an entirely different channel.

One night a young man, who had been attacked by robbers, was brought to Hazlemere. He was almost insensible from the injuries he had received, and was committed to my care by Mr. Radcliffe. While I was watching over him that night, he became light-headed, and amid his ravings frequently repeated the name of Courtenay. Already I had been struck by his remarkable resemblance to Seymour Delacombe, and the mention of this name confirmed my suspicions. A mark on the young man's shoulder convinced me that he was my son.

Yes, he was indeed my son—my Alberic—whom I had not beheld since he was an infant.

Oh! with what rapture I gazed upon his features. The flood-gates of my heart were burst open, and the long, long repressed tide rushed in.

My transports of delight were soon succeeded by emotions of terror. I had found my son—my

dearest treasure on earth—but I should lose him again as soon as found. I dared not tell him I was his mother. He would spurn me from him if he knew all. Oh! the agony of that thought. A thousand extravagant notions passed through my brain. Nothing I would not attempt to keep my Alberic near me. Mrs. Radcliffe might be induced to aid my plan. She still loved Seymour, and would befriend Seymour's son. But this was the mere beginning of my wild scheme of which the consummation was to be Alberic's marriage with May. This scheme presented itself so vividly to my imagination, and seemed so feasible, that I resolved to act upon it. Nor was it so mad as it would appear. Mrs. Radcliffe was a mere puppet in my hands. I could move her as I pleased. May's heart was disengaged, and I thought her susceptibilities could be excited in favour of the handsome youth.

Success in the first instance attended my de-

sign. Mrs. Radcliffe, as I anticipated, took the liveliest interest in the young man, when convinced that he was the son of her old lover, and a strong and lasting impression was produced on May by Alberic's good looks and romantic character.

But all my combinations were destroyed by the unexpected return of him I most dreaded on earth. Fate, that had brought Alberic to Hazlemere, brought his father there likewise. Flight alone seemed left me, but I would not fly. The conflict was unequal, but I did not shrink from it. I knew that Colonel Delacombe feared me more than I feared him.

X.

THE PORTRAIT.

THAT night, about eleven o'clock, May was in her dressing-room. Seated beside her was a woman, more than double her own age, whose pale features bore traces of affliction. All at once their discourse was interrupted by a tap at the door. May's companion started up, and made a quick exit by a side-door communicating with the adjoining bedchamber.

Scarcely had she disappeared than Lady Rich-

borough entered by the other door, bearing a taper.

May expressed great surprise at beholding her.

"I thought you meant to pass the night at Hazlemere," she observed.

"I have come back purposely to have a talk with you, dear," replied the other, putting down the candle, and seating herself. "I hope you don't feel very sleepy, for I have a great deal to say."

"I don't feel at all sleepy," replied May. "I almost fancy you have come to tell me that the marquis has thought better of it, and desires to be released from his engagement."

"No such thing. You have made him the happiest of men, and depend upon it, he will hold you to your promise. You will see him here to-morrow. However, it is not of the marquis that I desire to speak, but of Colonel Delacombe. I am

ashamed to say that I read his letter very hurriedly this morning, and the most important part of it escaped me. What he mentions is so curious that I could not rest till I had imparted it to you, so I returned to-night with Mrs. Woodcot."

"You excite my curiosity very much," cried May. "What can the colonel have told you?"

"Have a moment's patience. I must first make you acquainted with a strange tragical event connected with my own family, or you will not understand the motive of the colonel's inquiries. My father, Sir Umfraville Ilminster, had a younger brother, who became a West India merchant, and settled in Jamaica. My uncle Alberic married a Jamaica lady, by whom he had one child—a daughter—named Barbara. My aunt died about two or three years after her marriage. I never saw my uncle, but I believe he was very amiable, though unfitted for business. There was

not a good understanding between him and my father, and they had ceased to correspond for some years, when Sir Umfraville received a very urgent letter from his brother, who it appeared had got into difficulties. Without immediate assistance, my uncle declared he should be ruined, and his daughter sacrificed to a man she detested. My father, I am sorry to say, was insensible to this appeal, and contented himself with sending out a clerk to Jamaica to assist in winding up his brother's affairs.

“The events I am relating occurred about four-and-twenty years ago. My cousin, Barbara Ilminster, was then very young, but to judge from her portrait, which was sent to my father, she must have been extremely beautiful. My uncle's chief creditor, Mr. Osborne, a planter, demanded her hand, and as he could not be refused—though Barbara hated him—the marriage was arranged.

But just as it was about to take place, my uncle died suddenly. Whether he sought deliverance from his troubles by suicide, or was poisoned, has never been ascertained.

“A terrible accusation was brought against my cousin Barbara. It was hinted that she administered the poison. But I do not believe the monstrous tale. If she had poisoned Mr. Osborne, who would have forced her to become his bride, I could understand it—but her father, who doted upon her—no! I cannot credit the accusation.

“Some colour, however, was given to the charge, because she left Jamaica, quite suddenly, in a packet that sailed a few hours before my uncle’s death. But against this it was urged that her father had enjoined her abrupt departure in order to get her out of Mr. Osborne’s way. Another circumstance has yet to be mentioned which raises grave doubts. She was accompanied in the

voyage by her nurse, and Mr. Bromley, the young clerk, whom my father had sent out to Jamaica. On landing at Southampton, Barbara and her nurse unaccountably disappeared, and have never been heard of since."

"A terrible and mysterious story indeed," observed May, who had listened with great interest to the narration. "It seems strange that I never heard it before."

"Sir Charles and I agreed not to mention it to you. It is one of those family histories that are best buried in oblivion, as it reflects little credit on our family. Sir Umfraville never spoke of his brother or of his niece. Perhaps he reproached himself with his conduct. Had he sent the money to Uncle Alberic—as he might have done—as he *ought* to have done—this dire calamity—perhaps other calamities—might have been averted. Heaven only knows!"

"Though circumstances are against her, I do not believe in Barbara's guilt," observed May. "What became of her portrait, which you say your uncle Alberic sent to your father?"

"I have not seen it for years," replied Myrtila. "But I think I can find it. Let me consider. Yes. It was put out of the way by Sir Umfraville, but I know he concealed it in a secret drawer of the old cabinet in your room. I dare say it is there still. Let us see."

"Some other time," said May, with evident uneasiness. "Not now."

But Myrtila would not be stayed. "I want to look at it myself," she cried.

And snatching up the taper, she passed through the side door into the bedchamber.

As she entered; the person who had preceded her hastily concealed herself behind the hangings of the bed.

May followed, and became reassured as she glanced around. It was a large, gloomy-looking chamber, panelled with black oak, partially hung with faded arras, and furnished with a large canopied bed, having tall, twisted posts, and tarnished brocade hangings. Against the wall, flanked by a couple of high-backed chairs, stood the antique cabinet. The taper scarcely illuminated the sombre room.

Giving the light to her companion, Myrtille unlocked the cabinet, and touching a spring at the back, a secret drawer flew open.

As she anticipated, the portrait was there. The features, depicted by an artist of no mean skill, were those of a young girl, of great beauty—the eyes large, dark, and full of fire, the complexion clear though pale, the hair dark and silky. There was an undefinable expression in the countenance.

Myrtilla gazed at the miniature for a few moments, and then, handing it to May, said, with a singular look :

“Have you ever seen that face before?”

“Seen it! How should I? Ha!” she exclaimed, as she regarded it more narrowly. “Is this your cousin Barbara Ilminster?”

“Yes.”

“Why, I trace a likeness—a strong likeness to Mrs. Sutton.”

“Barbara Ilminster and Mrs. Sutton are the same person,” replied Lady Richborough. “That is what Colonel Delacombe’s letter informed me. That is what I came to tell you.”

May’s exclamations of astonishment were interrupted by the sudden appearance of the woman who was concealed behind the hangings of the bed.

“Yes,” cried this person to Myrtilla, who was

petrified with astonishment. "There is no longer any necessity for concealment. In me you behold your cousin Barbara—the wife of Seymour Delacombe, and the mother of his son Alberic, whom you have hitherto known as Hilary St. Ives. You wonder to see me here, in your father's house, which I could never have entered during his lifetime," continued the unhappy woman, still addressing Lady Richborough; "and never at any time under my own name. But I am here almost against my will. I have striven to fly, but a power, that I could not resist, has detained me. An asylum has been offered me by May, and I could not refuse it. I shall not need it long."

There was a brief pause, which was broken by Myrtille.

"Whatever errors you have committed," she said, in a sympathising voice, "I am sure you have atoned for them."

"Heaven only knows how much I have suffered," rejoined Barbara. "But my troubles are coming to an end. I have had enough time for repentance—and I *have* repented."

"I fear you have still some burden on your soul which would be relieved by confession," said Myrtilla. "Open your heart to us, and rest assured of our sympathy. We will offer you every consolation in our power."

"I have written down the particulars of my sad history for my son. He will recount them to you when I am gone."

"You seem to have a presentiment of some impending calamity," observed Myrtilla.

"I have," replied Barbara. "In all that has occurred lately I discern the hand of fate, and the final event cannot be far off. I have struggled against my destiny. My desire is to find a retreat where I can hide my sorrows, and die unknown."

"You have found a refuge here, and you must live for your son," said May.

"If he bids me live, I *will* live," cried the unhappy woman. "I have appointed to meet him to-morrow night, but before then he will have learnt my history, and may not come. In that case nothing will be left me but despair."

"Do not alarm yourself thus needlessly," said May. "Be sure he will keep the appointment. But open your heart to us. You need fear no severe judgment, and you will feel easier for the confession."

Barbara yielded. They repaired to the dressing-room, where each having taken a seat, she commenced her relation, to which her hearers listened with the deepest attention. They made no remark, though now and then they could not help exchanging a glance.

"I know you must condemn me," said Barbara, as she brought her story to a close, "and you

will condemn me justly, for my conduct is utterly indefensible, but I may perhaps be shown mercy hereafter, on account of my sincere contrition, and the agonies of remorse I have endured.

“You now know what a wretched, guilty thing I am, but you do *not* know, and never can know, what I have suffered, because I cannot, dare not, attempt to describe to you my sleepless nights, when my pillow has seemed stuffed with thorns, and when I have been driven to the verge of madness by despair. No stings so sharp as those of a bad conscience. I have not exaggerated my sufferings to excite your commiseration. I want words to describe my mental anguish. I shall find no peace — no rest — except in the grave. Perhaps not there.”

“Be comforted,” cried May. “After so much gloom brighter days must be at hand. You have a son to love.”

“If I felt sure of his love, I should wish for

life," rejoined Barbara. "But I believe I am doomed."

"Doomed!" exclaimed both her hearers.

"Yes. I need not remind you that there is a superstition connected with this house. Poor Sir Charles Ilminster was warned of his approaching death. I, too, have had a warning."

The solemnity of her manner made both her hearers shudder.

"On returning to-night from the meeting with my son in the park, I passed through the library, the window of which had been left open, and hurried up the great staircase without interruption of any kind.

I had gained the portrait-gallery, and was hastening along it, when a dark figure seemed to detach itself from the wall, and bar my way. Fear nailed me to the spot. A pale phosphoric glimmer showed me the features of my father,

but white as those of a corpse—and the look he fixed upon me was inexpressibly mournful. My tongue clove to my palate, or I would have spoken. As I still gazed at the apparition in speechless terror, the ghostly glimmer died away, and the figure melted into the darkness. How I gained my room I know not.”

Amid the profound silence that ensued, the pendule on the mantel-piece struck twelve. Warned by the strokes, Barbara rose to retire, and Lady Richborough arose at the same time.

“Think over what I have told you, my dear,” observed Barbara, as she bade good night to May; “and if you deem it best that I should not remain longer here, I will depart to-morrow.”

“Oh, no! you must not go!” cried May. “Decide on nothing till you have seen your son.”

“Well, I will trespass on your kindness till then. Good night!”

She had nearly reached her own room, which was at the further end of the corridor, when she heard quick footsteps behind, and seeing Lady Richborough hastening towards her, she immediately stopped.

“It is very late, but I must keep you up a little longer,” said Myrtila. “I have something to say to you that I could not mention before May.”

“Come with me, then,” rejoined Barbara. “I shall not sleep, so it matters not when I seek my couch.”

XI.

A VISION.

THE chamber assigned to Barbara was not so large as May's, but similarly furnished.

On their entrance, the room looked so dark, owing to the black oak panels and the dusky hangings of the bed, that Barbara lighted a couple of wax candles on the dressing-table.

Since she had resumed her own name, a noticeable change had taken place in this remarkable woman's demeanour. Her manner was prouder than it had been as Mrs. Sutton. Seeing Lady

Richborough gaze at her steadfastly, she drew herself up haughtily.

"I now recognise my cousin Barbara," said Myrtilla; "and the wonder is that I did not recognise you before. I am sorry you have not had a better welcome to my father's house."

"I have had a better welcome than I deserve," rejoined Barbara. "Pray be seated. You want to talk to me. Put any questions you think proper. I will answer them truthfully. I have nothing to conceal. I cannot darken myself in your estimation."

"I have no questions to ask," rejoined Myrtilla. "I do not want to talk to you of the past, but of the future."

"The future!" exclaimed Barbara, gloomily. "I have nothing to do with the future."

"Yes—yes—you must have some plans. Let us discuss them."

"Where would be the use? Till I have seen Alberic I can have no plans."

"I see you do not give me credit for the deep interest I take in you, Barbara," rejoined Myrtila.

"You may be sure I am making no idle professions, when I say that I will serve you, if I can, and you will let me."

"I thank you much, Myrtila, but I want nothing—except rest. But you may serve my son."

"It is too late to serve him in the way you mean. Had I known your secret, I might have acted otherwise. But May is now engaged to the Marquis of Hartlepool."

"I am very sorry for it, and you will one day regret that you have been instrumental in bringing about that union. She will not be happy with the marquis."

"Why not? He is devoted to her."

"Maybe; but she cannot give him her heart. That is already bestowed upon my son. This is no idle assertion. She told me so herself."

"Had I known this before, the mischief might have been prevented. But it is now too late. The match cannot be broken off. The Radcliffes desire it, and are pledged to it."

"Better their pledges should be broken than May rendered miserable."

"None can know better than yourself that Mr. Radcliffe's word is his bond. His promise will never be retracted."

"A promise made in error is not binding," said Barbara. "When Mr. Radcliffe is told of my marriage with Seymour Delacombe, and learns that the so-called Hilary St. Ives is our son, his objections will vanish, and he will rue his promise to the marquis."

"Still, he will consider himself bound by it, and

most assuredly the marquis will never release May from the engagement."

"Not for my son's sake—not for mine, but for May's sake, I implore you to prevent the marriage. You *can* prevent it, if you will."

"Impossible. I am too far committed."

"You will not, you mean," cried Barbara, almost fiercely. "Mark what I say. If ill comes of the marriage—as it will—the sin will lie at your door."

"You cannot alarm me," rejoined Myrtille, with affected indifference, though not without uneasiness. "But let us dismiss the subject, since it is utterly impossible I can interfere in the matter, even if disposed. Is there any chance of effecting a reconciliation between you and Colonel Delacombe?"

"None," replied Barbara, in a decided tone.

"I think otherwise. For his son's sake he

might be content to overlook the past. A material change has taken place in his sentiments since he has ascertained that you belong to our family. Shall I read you what he says in his letter to me?"

"I do not care to hear it," rejoined Barbara, coldly. "I have wronged him too deeply ever to hope for forgiveness. He may forgive me when I am gone—but not till then. With Alberic it is different. He may overlook my errors—may love me—may pour balm into my bruised heart. Heaven grant it! Heaven grant it! Oh! with what fear and trembling I look forward to our meeting. Surely he will not cast me off! Yet he may!—he may!" she added, with a look of inexpressible agony. "What will happen to me then?"

The spectacle of her anguish was unsupportable, and Myrtila prepared to quit the room.

"Heaven be merciful to you, my unhappy cousin," she ejaculated, as she went forth.

Barbara did not notice her departure, so intense was her affliction; but at length, becoming aware that she was alone, she flung herself on her knees, and prayed long and fervently.

Somewhat comforted, she disrobed herself, and, being completely exhausted, soon sank into a heavy slumber.

A vision, for it seemed more vivid than a dream, arose before her, and she beheld, bathed in glorious sunshine, and surrounded by a sea blue as the deep blue sky, the lovely island where she first drew breath.

Once more she inhaled an atmosphere laden with the scents of tropical flowers and trees. Once more she felt the heat of the flaming sun, which, fierce as were its beams, seemed to exhilarate her. Once more she heard the cease-

less screams and chatter of the parrots mingled with the screams and chatter of the negroes. Once more her eye ranged over plains studded with dazzlingly white habitations, long savannahs fringed with groves of cocoa-trees, and thickets of cactus, plantations of sugar-cane and coffee. Once more she gazed on those bays of unequalled beauty where she had often sailed, and those blue mountains which she had often longed to climb. The whole scene was before her, with its fervid atmosphere, its fierce sunshine, its tropical beauties, and its delights. She seemed to have grown young again—to have become once more an innocent child. Her sad heart beat with pleasurable emotions, and she echoed the light laugh of her nurse Bonita. Yes, her dear devoted Bonita was alive again, smiling upon her as of yore, and bringing her cates and fruits. Suddenly she heard a voice. It was her father's.

He was calling for his dear little Barbara. She flew to meet him. He clasped her in his arms, and kissed her brow. But his lips seemed icy cold, and with a start she awoke.

Was she really awake, or still dreaming? Her father seemed to be bending over the couch, but the expression of his countenance was changed, and was now radiant. As she stretched out her arms the apparition vanished.

XII.

FATHER AND SON.

ALBERIC DELACOMBE, as we shall henceforth style him, remained for several hours occupied with the history of his unhappy mother.

There was more of the confession than we have deemed it necessary to lay before the reader, but the latter portion was chiefly explanatory of the motives that had led her to quit Hazlemere. An insane desire to disappear from the world, of which she was utterly weary, had again beset her, and her precautions had been so well taken

that she might perhaps never have been heard of more, if her strong maternal feelings had not overpowered her resolution and brought her back to Boxgrove.

Nothing astonished Alberic Delacombe more than to learn, as he did from the concluding lines of his mother's sad story, that she belonged to the Ilminster family.

Utterly unprepared for this revelation he could scarcely credit it, and any satisfaction he might have derived from the discovery was marred by reflections that could not fail to occur to his mind.

For more than an hour after he had finished the perusal of the painful story, he remained pondering upon its details. Greatly shocked, greatly distressed, he still pitied his mother. Though unable to absolve her, he could not condemn her.

At last he sought his couch, but excitement banished slumber. Rising at an early hour from

his sleepless pillow, he partook of a slight breakfast, and telling Dame Perrins that he should certainly return in the evening, set off for the nearest railway station, and proceeded to town. Restless, over-excited, and uneasy, he could not otherwise employ the interval of time.

On arriving at the Langham Hotel, where he was staying, a fresh surprise awaited him. His father had just arrived by the night mail from Paris, and Alberic immediately repaired to his room.

The colonel, who was still in bed, being a good deal fatigued by the journey, told him he had started contrary to the injunctions of his physician, but he felt so unaccountably anxious that he would not delay his departure.

"I was resolved to start, coûte qui coûte," he cried; "and I do not think I am the worse for the journey. But what news do you bring me? Have you seen Mrs. Sutton?"

The young man replied by placing in the colonel's hands the packet containing his mother's history.

"That will tell you all," he said. "When you have read it, summon me."

And he quitted the room.

More than an hour elapsed, and receiving no summons, Alberic became uneasy, and went up to his father's room.

He tapped at the door, but all remained silent within, and his uneasiness increasing, he entered the room, and found the colonel fully dressed and seated near a small writing-table.

Before him lay the manuscript which he had been reading. His hands were clasped against his brow, and he was so absorbed that he appeared quite unconscious of his son's presence, till Alberic touched him. He then uncovered his face, which was ghastly pale.

The colonel was greatly changed—shaken and

enfeebled by illness. His splendid frame was emaciated. His hair was blanched, but his dark brows and moustaches contrasted forcibly with the almost cadaverous hue of his countenance, as did the large cicatrix with which his cheek was marked.

Alberic gazed at him anxiously, alarmed by the expression of his countenance, for it was easy to perceive that a terrible struggle was passing within.

The colonel made a vain effort to speak, but his accents were broken and unintelligible, and, rising from his chair, he flung his arms round his son's neck, and gave way to an access of emotion.

Very shortly, however, he recovered, and, as if ashamed of the display he had made, endeavoured to assume a cold expression. But his lips still quivered, and the voice was husky in which he bade Alberic be seated.

"You have read this confession," he said, laying his hand upon the papers, but keeping his searching eye on his son as he spoke. "What do you think of it?"

"Do not ask me to pass judgment on my mother, sir," rejoined Alberic.

"Well, if you evade my question," rejoined the colonel, sternly, "I will put another. What would you have me do?"

"I dare not ask you,—yet I would it were in your power to forgive her."

A flush dyed the colonel's pale cheek, and his eye blazed fiercely.

"Alberic," he cried, "I would do much for you—but not that."

"Father," rejoined Alberic, "have you read that confession attentively?"

"Most attentively."

"And does it not move you?"

"Deeply."

“Shall I describe its effect on me? Shall I say how much those cries, which evidently proceed from a broken heart, have touched me? A fatal mistake has led to frightful consequences. But there was a time when she was guiltless—guiltless, at least, towards you—and when all this misery might have been spared. I would bring you back to that time.”

“Yes, I am not free from blame,” said the colonel. “Had I known who she was I might have acted differently.”

“The past is irreparable. But I would try to save you from further self-reproach. If my unhappy mother has not expiated her errors by a life of penitence, she has suffered much. By those sufferings—by your former love—I would intercede for her.”

“Heaven, I hope, will forgive her,” said the colonel. “But do not urge me further now,” he

added, with a movement of impatience. "Hereafter, I may feel differently."

"Your forgiveness must not be delayed, if it is to be of avail. I am sure she has not long to live!"

"Why do you think so?" demanded the colonel.

"The impression was produced upon me last night. I cannot divest myself of it."

"I do not think I shall live long myself," muttered his father.

"Then I would the more earnestly exhort you to forgive her—and without delay," urged his son. "Go with me to Boxgrove to-night. You will see her. Console her with a word—one word will suffice. You will make me happy, and she will die in peace. Listen to me, I implore you."

And he would have flung himself at his father's feet, but the colonel checked him.

"You have conquered, my son," he said. "I will do as you desire. I will go with you to-night. I felt I had something to do when I could not rest in Paris. I now discover what it is."

"Some good power inspired your return," cried his son. "Had you delayed a few days, it might have been too late."

"True," ejaculated the colonel, solemnly.

He then locked up the packet in his travelling case. This done, he went down with his son to the coffee-room.

XIII.

FURTHER EXPLANATIONS.

THE colonel ordered breakfast, and Alberic, who had eaten nothing since he had left the cottage at an early hour, was well disposed to join him, and did far more justice to what was set before them than his father did.

They had just finished their repast, when who should come into the coffee-room, which happened to be empty at the time, but Mr. Thornton and Mr. Radcliffe. On seeing them the colonel immediately arose, and his son followed his example.

“God bless my soul, colonel, is that you?” exclaimed Mr. Thornton, hurrying towards him, and shaking him cordially by the hand. “Just returned from Paris, I suppose. Charmed to see you back. Can’t say you’re looking very well, though.”

“I am very far from well, my dear friend,” replied the colonel. “But I trust I shall soon come round.”

He then addressed himself to Mr. Radcliffe, who returned his salutation with great stiffness and formality. After a few matter of course observations, the colonel drew Alberic forward, and said,

“I am glad of this opportunity of presenting my son to you, gentlemen. You have known him heretofore as Hilary St. Ives. Pray know him now as Alberic Delacombe.”

“I am very glad indeed to know Mr. Alberic

Delacombe," said Mr. Thornton, shaking hands with the young man.

Mr. Radcliffe bowed very stiffly, and merely remarked,

"I have been told that you had adopted Mr. St. Ives, colonel, but I was not aware that you had accorded him your name."

"He bears the name to which he is lawfully entitled," replied the colonel, haughtily. "He is my son, sir."

"Born in wedlock?" observed Mr. Radcliffe, with a half sneer.

"Hear me, Mr. Radcliffe," said the colonel, "and let what I say remove all your doubts. He is my son by my marriage with the only daughter of Mr. Alberic Ilminster, of Jamaica."

"Is this the fact, colonel?" cried Mr. Radcliffe, astounded.

"The fact, sir! Do you doubt my word?"

"Heaven forbid! Only I am so much astonished."

"No wonder you are astonished," cried Mr. Thornton. "So am I. Why, Alberic Ilminster, of Jamaica, was the younger brother of Sir Umfraville Ilminster of Boxgrove, consequently your wife, colonel, must have been poor Sir Charles's first cousin."

"Perfectly correct, sir."

"I presume she died many years ago?"

"You are mistaken, sir. She is alive now."

"Zounds! you have contrived to keep her in the background in a very extraordinary manner," cried the old gentleman, winking at Mr. Radcliffe. "We never heard of her."

"Never till this moment," echoed the other.

"Again you are mistaken, sir. Both you and Mr. Radcliffe know her, and have seen her repeatedly."

"Pray explain the riddle," cried Mr. Thornton, with a puzzled look, which, however, changed to a cunning smile, as he exclaimed, "Aha! I have it!—Mrs. Sutton—eh?"

Colonel Delacombe nodded assent.

"Is Mrs. Sutton this young man's mother?" demanded Mr. Radcliffe, eagerly.

"My wife and Alberic's mother," rejoined the colonel.

The worthy gentleman looked inexpressibly relieved.

"Would I had known this before," he exclaimed.

"I always thought Mrs. Sutton a very superior woman," observed Mr. Thornton. "But I little dreamed who she was."

As the coffee-room began now to fill, they adjourned to a private room, where they could continue their conversation without interruption.

By this time an extraordinary change had become manifest in Mr. Radcliffe's demeanour towards Colonel Delacombe and his son, especially towards the latter. He was now just as friendly with Alberic as he had previously been cold and reserved, and strove to make amends for the rudeness he had shown the young man. More than once he repeated, "Oh, that I had known this before!"

When the topic on which they had been engaged was dismissed, Mr. Thornton alluded to the engagement that had just been entered into between the Marquis of Hartlepool and May, and the colonel of course offered his congratulations to the old gentleman and Mr. Radcliffe.

"I know the marquis very well," he said. "My son and I saw a good deal of him in Rome, and liked him. He is not very brilliant, but he is amiable, and—a marquis."

"Yes, yes, it is a splendid match," cried Mr

Thornton, rubbing his hands with delight. "We are all enchanted with it—eh?" he added to Mr. Radcliffe, who did not, however, respond very warmly to the appeal.

"It is a very important alliance, no doubt," he said; "but I think it has been entered into rather precipitately. May has scarcely had sufficient time for consideration."

"Why, what's this? You insisted upon an immediate decision, and I think you were perfectly right," cried Mr. Thornton. "Don't you agree with me, colonel?"

"With most girls there would be none, that I own," rejoined the colonel. "But Miss Radcliffe is not an ordinary girl. I did not think she was likely to be dazzled by rank and splendour."

"Nor is she," replied Mr. Radcliffe. "I won't say she sacrificed her own feelings, but she consented to oblige us all—that's the fact."

The colonel slightly shrugged his shoulders, but made no remark.

“She cannot fail to be happy, for the marquis will let her have her own way in everything,” observed Mr. Thornton. “We mean to have the marriage celebrated with as little delay as possible, and, in fact, it is on business connected with it that we have come up to town to-day.”

To Alberic the subject under discussion was exquisitely painful, and dreading lest he should betray his feelings, he got up, and moved to a window. He appeared to be watching the carriages in Portland-place, but he scarcely noticed them, when Mr. Radcliffe came up to him, and, patting him in a friendly manner on the back, said, in a low voice :

“Ah! if I had only known as much yesterday as I do now, a very different arrangement

might have been made—not so splendid, but more satisfactory to me.”

“I could not enter into any explanation then, Mr. Radcliffe, even if you would have allowed me,” rejoined Alberic. “And now it is too late.”

Here a slight cough from the colonel recalled Mr. Radcliffe.

“I must claim your attention for a few minutes more, sir,” remarked the colonel. “You are acquainted with the painful and peculiar circumstances connected with my marriage. You are acquainted with my wife’s sad story. You have known her intimately for many years, and can judge of her conduct during that term.”

“Her conduct, ever since I have known her, has been irreproachable,” said Mr. Radcliffe, emphatically.

“Take my testimony to the same effect, colonel,” cried Mr. Thornton.

"For my son's sake," pursued the colonel, "I have resolved to forget the past. And though others may censure me, I do not think you will blame my determination."

"On the contrary, I applaud it," cried Mr. Radcliffe. "And I can assure you it will sincerely gratify me to convey the joyful intelligence to your wife."

"I thank you, sir," said the colonel. "But she must receive her forgiveness from no other lips than mine."

"Then return with me to Boxgrove to-night, colonel," cried Mr. Thornton. "See her without delay."

"It was my intention to run down for that purpose with my son," replied the colonel. "I gladly accept your invitation. You shall precede us," he added to Alberic. "Meet your mother as appointed, and tell her all that has occurred."

That will obviate the necessity of further explanation, and when I see her, it will be with less painful emotion either on her part or mine."

In pursuance of the arrangement, Alberic set off for Boxgrove Park by himself, leaving the colonel to the care of his friends.

The three gentlemen dined at the Langham, and did not take their departure till late in the evening.

XIV.

THE THUNDERSTORM.

ALBERIC had returned to the cottage.

He was all impatience to see his mother, and convey to her the joyful intelligence of which he was the bearer. The minutes seemed to pass slowly, but at last the appointed hour drew near, and he was preparing to set out for the place of rendezvous in the park when a violent thunderstorm came on, accompanied by a deluge of rain.

He waited, therefore, for a few minutes, expecting that the fury of the storm would abate,

but as no improvement took place, he started, in spite of all Dame Perrins's attempts to dissuade him. The good old dame thought he must be mad to venture forth on such a night. The rain was coming down in torrents at the time, and the blue forked flashes nearly blinded him, but he dashed across the road, and was soon in the thick of the chesnut-grove.

Here an appalling incident occurred. A loud peal of thunder rattled overhead like a discharge of artillery. A bolt fell, and a large tree was struck within fifty yards of him—one of its huge arms shivered, and the bark stripped from the side of the trunk.

Stunned by the dreadful concussion, he was unable to move for a few moments, and when his powers returned, he almost thought of turning back, as it was not likely his mother would brave such a storm—but he went on.

Not without great difficulty, and frequent interruption, did he get out of the grove, and then not at the point he expected. But for the incessant blaze of lightning the night would have been pitch-dark. However, he descried the clump of trees, and strode on in that direction as rapidly as the slippery turf would allow him.

Still, the thunder rolled awfully, the lightning flashed, and the hissing rain descended in torrents.

Suddenly, he underwent a new alarm. Amid the silence that followed a loud crash, he heard a piercing scream, and felt convinced that it proceeded from his mother.

Was she in danger, or merely alarmed by the thunder? Another scream followed, though scarcely distinguishable amid the din of the storm.

Full of terror, he hurried on, and was nearing

the group of trees when two ruffianly-looking men burst forth. The foremost was armed with a heavy bludgeon, but the other grasped a weapon, which, seen by the lightning, looked like a long, sharp-pointed knife, and seemed dripping with blood.

The countenances of the miscreants almost proclaimed the murderous deed on which they had been engaged. Alberic recognised them at once as the two villains who had robbed and maltreated him on Wootton Heath, and coupling their presence on the spot with the screams he had just heard, fearful apprehensions were roused.

Perhaps they had assassinated his mother.

Maddened by the thought, with a fierce cry he rushed upon them, regardless of any consequences to himself. He was wholly unarmed, but rage supplied him with superhuman strength,

and made him a match for his antagonists, though both were athletic men. Closing with the foremost ruffian, and catching him by the throat before he could strike a blow with the bludgeon, he hurled him backwards against his comrade.

In falling the wretch was seriously hurt by a stroke of the knife intended for the young man, who was thus released from one of his assailants. The next moment he was in possession of the bludgeon, and a smashing blow with it caused the other ruffian to drop his knife.

Both villains then fled, but the one who was wounded had not gone more than a hundred yards when he fell to the ground exhausted by loss of blood. There he lay, vowing, with horrible oaths, that he would hang the comrade who had abandoned him.

Alberic, however, thought no more of either of them. A half-stifled cry directed him to the

spot where his unfortunate mother was lying, and he instantly flew towards her. The lightning gave a livid hue like that of death to her pallid features, her eyes were closed, and but that she still breathed, or rather gasped for breath, he might have thought that life was extinct.

But the life-blood was flowing fast from a deep wound in her side, and he strove in vain to stanch the crimson stream.

XV.

A RETROSPECT.

How the unhappy Barbara came by her fate must now be related.

The last day she was ever destined to see was spent in perfect seclusion. May and Myrtilla passed several hours with her, but could not induce her to converse with them. Her thoughts were elsewhere. She was told that Mr. Malham was in the house, and wished to see her, but she declined. She also refused to see Mrs. Radcliffe,



alleging that she was not equal to an interview with any one.

“Beg your mother to excuse me,” she said to May. “If all is well I will see her to-morrow. Pray let me be undisturbed to-day.”

It was evident that she had not been able to conquer her antipathy to her former mistress. But her manner towards May was most tender and affectionate, and when they were alone together she expressed a truly maternal solicitude for her happiness.

“I wish I could persuade myself that the engagement you have entered into will make you happy,” she said. “But I know you can never give the marquis your heart. On no account, however, break off the engagement, unless your father permits you to do so. Tell him all, and be guided by his counsel. The sole desire of my life would have been gratified if you could have

been united to Alberic, but fate seems against it, and we must bow to its decrees. Whatever betide, may you be happy!"

"The marquis has been here all day," said May; "and he must be blind indeed if he does not perceive that I dislike him."

Barbara regarded her compassionately.

"You have been persuaded to take a foolish step, my dear child," she said. "But your father will never allow you to be sacrificed if you tell him the truth. Hide nothing from him."

"He is gone to London with grandpapa, or I would have spoken to him to-day. I will never wed the marquis."

After this the unhappy woman begged to be left entirely to herself for a few hours.

How she passed the time was not known, but when May entered the room she found her on her knees, and her eyes were red with weeping. However, she was perfectly calm, and almost

cheerful, and continued so until evening. But as the hour approached when she was to meet her son, she became nervously excited.

As there were indications of the terrible storm we have described, her companions endeavoured to dissuade her from going forth, but she would not be turned from her purpose.

May and Myrtila went with her to the library. They took no lights, and as they hastily traversed the gallery, a dazzlingly vivid flash momentarily illumined the long line of portraits, while a clap of thunder shook the mansion.

"I must meet Alberic," she cried. "I must learn my fate."

Fearful of being detained, she resolved to set out at once.

"Do not go, I beseech you," cried May, greatly terrified. "Stop till the storm has passed."

But Barbara hurried on.

They had descended the great staircase, and reached the library without being perceived. Barbara paused for a moment only to strain May to her bosom, and whisper a word in her ear.

Just as the window was opened another vivid flash of lightning drove them back, and almost blinded them.

When the others regained their sight, Barbara was gone. But they beheld her upon the terrace, speeding to her destination, unappalled by the terrors of the storm.

"Heaven preserve her!" ejaculated May, fervently.

Heaven's support was needed by the unhappy woman. Her hour had well-nigh come.

She had gained the park, and though the storm had increased in violence, though the rain beat against her brow, and the lightning played around her, she went on.

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"I shall find my son there," she exclaimed.
"He will not fail me."

She did not find him. But she found others whom she did not expect.

As she entered the woody ring, two savage-looking men who had watched her approach, as shown by the lightning, burst upon her. One of them seized her roughly by the arm to prevent her flight, and, brandishing a knife, threatened her with instant death if she uttered a cry.

"We knew you would come, in spite of the storm," cried the ruffian, in a jeering tone.

The unfortunate woman glanced around, vainly hoping that her son would appear.

"Ay, you may look round, madam," cried her captor. "You'll see nothin' on him to-night."

"You lie, villain!" she exclaimed. "My son will rescue me."

"Don't be too sure of that, madam. What money have you got about you?"

"None. I have neither money nor valuables. Release me at once, ruffian."

Both men laughed derisively.

"We ain't a-goin' to part with you like that, madam," said the other robber. "You ought to have known better than to come out on an arrand like this, without purse, or pocket-book, or rings. But since you've been so careless, you must come along wi' us, and I'd recommend you to come quietly."

"I will not stir from this spot," she cried, resolutely.

They seized her and attempted to drag her off, but she caught hold of the branch of a tree, and screamed loudly for help.

"Hold your tongue!" cried one of the men, with a terrible imprecation, "or I'll make you keep silence."

But she struggled to get free, and continued

her outcries, hoping they would reach the ears of her son. But for the rattling of the thunder he would have heard them.

The struggle continued for a minute longer. Then giving utterance to a sharper cry, she fell back into the arms of one of her assailants.

“Why, thou’st killed her, Seth Cooper!” cried this ruffian, aghast at the dreadful deed.

“She forced me to do it, curse her!” cried Seth.

They were debating what should be done, when, to their great alarm, they became aware of Alberic’s approach, and laying down the body of their still breathing victim, they rushed to meet him.

The result has been already narrated.

XVI.

HOW BARBARA WAS BROUGHT BACK TO BOXGROVE.

ALBERIC raised the dying woman tenderly, and subduing the emotion that threatened to overpower him, said,

"Do you not know me, mother? It is your son."

The words seemed to recal her to life.

With a cry of delight she flung her arms round his neck, and kissed him repeatedly.

But the effort was too great. Her hold re-

laxed. Her head dropped, and a shiver passed through her frame, prelude of death.

"Speak to me, dear mother! speak to me!" cried Alberic, greatly alarmed.

"You have read my history. You know all?" she rejoined faintly.

"All."

"And you forgive me?" she asked, with trembling eagerness.

"Dearest mother, I have nothing to forgive. But I bring you my father's forgiveness."

"Is he here?" she cried. "Bring him to me."

"Alas, I cannot!" rejoined her son. "He is on his way to you."

"But he will not arrive in time. I knew we should never meet again on earth. Bid him farewell for me, and say——"

Here her voice became inaudible.

Alberic placed his ear close to her lips, but

could not reach the victim. Her eyes, however, were fast upon him, and did not quit him till they gave him.

Another shudder, and all was over.

He gave way to no unavailing transports of grief, but continued to hold her in his arms and gaze at her rigid features, which, seen by the lightning, sometimes looked as if life had returned to them.

From this state he was roused by shouts proceeding from some men who had descried him from another part of the park, and were hurrying towards him.

Laying down the body, he answered their shouts, and the men soon afterwards coming up proved to be Frank Mowatt, the head gamekeeper, and two of his subordinates. All three had guns, and were attended by a couple of large hounds, and the latter began to growl as they approached the scene of the murder.

"Why, what's this?" cried Mowatt, horrified by the spectacle that met his gaze. "Who has done the foul deed? Thou?" he added, levelling his gun at Alberic.

"Keep your shot for the right man," rejoined the other, sternly. "One of the assassins is not far off, and the other must be in the park, and may be captured if you don't waste time."

His manner caused the keeper to lower his gun, while instant proof of the truth of the assertion was afforded by the hounds, who, having discovered the fallen wretch, were threatening to worry him, and had already given him a taste of their sharp fangs. The two under-keepers hurried to the spot, called off the dogs, and secured the terrified caitiff.

"Leave this villain to our charge," cried Alberic, who came up the next moment with Mowatt, "and go in search of his accomplice. You cannot fail to track him with these hounds."

"Ay, they're on his trail already," rejoined one of the keepers. "Must we go, Master Mowatt?"

"Ay, to be sure, Paul, and bring him back dead or alive," rejoined the head keeper. "I'll take care of this chap, and shoot him if he gives any trouble."

"Sarve him right, too," cried Paul, as he hurried after his mate.

The hounds had evidently got on the scent, and led them towards the thicket at the bottom of the park.

While Alberic and Mowatt were considering what it would be best to do under the circumstances, the head keeper thought he could discover some persons in the neighbourhood of the mansion, and in order to attract their attention, he not only shouted lustily, but fired off one of the barrels of his gun.

The signal was quickly attended to. The



persons whom the keeper had seen were some of the men-servants, who had been sent by May and Lady Richborough to look for Mrs. Sutton. With them was Mr. Malham, the surgeon, who chanced to be at the house at the time.

Guided by the shouts and the report of the gun, the whole party were soon on the spot, and filled with consternation on learning the dreadful occurrence. Mr. Malham was profoundly affected. A glance at the body showed him that life was extinct, but still he knelt down to examine the wound.

By his direction a hurdle was brought, and on it was carefully laid the body, which he covered with his own ample cloak. Alberic was too much overcome to take part in the melancholy proceedings, and remained looking sadly on, with his arms folded upon his breast.

The little procession then moved slowly towards

the mansion, the rear being brought up by Frank Mowatt and two grooms, who had charge of the prisoner.

Here we mention that Seth Cooper was captured by the two keepers in the thicket, and being taken by them to the Hall, was lodged with his partner in guilt in an outbuilding until the arrival of the officers.

Meanwhile, Colonel Delacombe had arrived at Boxgrove, and was still in the entrance-hall with Mr. Radcliffe and Mr. Thornton. They had just been joined by May and Mrs. Woodcot, when the principal door was thrown open, and Mr. Malham came in, followed by the bearers with their ghastly burden. Behind them appeared Alberic.

Covered from head to foot by the cloak, as with a pall, the body was laid by the bearers on an antique carved oak table in the centre of the hall, above which hung a lamp.

As the body was brought in, Oswald came forth from the drawing-room, which opened upon the entrance-hall, and was immediately followed by Mrs. Radcliffe, Myrtille, and the Marquis of Hartlepool.

Astonishment and horror kept the throng of spectators mute, but the climax was reached when Colonel Delacombe stepped forward and drew aside the cloak that shrouded the pallid features of his wife.

Uttering a sharp cry, he would have fallen to the ground, if he had not been caught by the surgeon.

XVII.

AN EVENTFUL EVENING.

THREE months had elapsed.

The ill-fated Barbara had found a resting-place in the family vault of the Ilminsters, and the murderers had paid the penalty of their crime.

Colonel Delacombe was still at Boxgrove. The terrible shock he had undergone had well-nigh proved fatal. At last he rallied, but was for several weeks confined to his room.

A large state chamber was assigned him by Mr. Thornton, fitted up with antique furnitur

and having bay windows that afforded him a view of the gardens and the park. There he sat in an easy chair, looking very pale, very thin, very feeble, but still very handsome; read the newspapers or a novel; dictated his letters to his son, or chatted with his visitors, of whom he had plenty.

For more than a month Alberic had been in constant attendance upon his sire, but since then he had been frequently in town. Mr. Thornton, who, as we know, played the part of host at Boxgrove, made him feel quite at home, and he went and came just as he liked.

May's engagement to the Marquis of Hartlepool still subsisted. Owing to recent events the marriage had been postponed — indefinitely, it seemed, for no entreaties on the part of the marquis or Lady Richborough could induce the young lady to fix the day. Thoroughly impressed

with the importance of the alliance, Mrs. Radcliffe prevented any positive rupture, though she could not bring about the consummation she desired. Mr. Radcliffe was secretly averse to the match, but would not withdraw the promise he had given to the marquis.

At length, the colonel came down-stairs, and a few drives in the open carriage completely restored him. A dinner-party was given to celebrate his recovery. It was a tolerably large party, but not at all formal, and comprised the Rev. Nisbet Jones and Mrs. Jones, Mrs. Clifford and her fair daughter Gwendoline, Mr. Brooke of Sandhills and his daughter Jessie, two or three young men, and most important of all, though we have placed him last in the list, the Marquis of Hartlepool. The marquis was staying at the time at Hazlemere. The members of the family consisted of Oswald and his mother, the Radcliffes, and, of

course, Mr. Thornton, who did the honours for his grand-daughter.

May did not always dine with her guests—perhaps we ought to call them grandpapa's guests—but she favoured them on this occasion. Lady Richborough was likewise present, and Alberic.

The dinner was excellent, as the dinners always were at Boxgrove, and passed off very pleasantly. Everybody was delighted to see Colonel Delacombe down-stairs again, and the colonel himself was in very good spirits, and ventured upon a glass of champagne, which he had not tasted since his illness.

But the Marquis of Hartlepool was really the life of the party. Placed between May and Myrtilla, he not only managed to amuse them both by his pleasant sallies, but contributed materially to the general gaiety.

After dinner, the ladies strolled out into the garden to enjoy the delicious summer evening, and the young men, who did not care for the claret and still less for the old port, so dear to Mr. Thornton and Mr. Radcliffe, sallied forth to join them. Alberic, however, soon separated himself from the merry party on the lawn, and withdrew to a more secluded part of the garden. He was seated on a bench near a bosquet, wrapped in thought, when he was roused from his reverie by May.

"I have come to look for you," she said.
"You must not desert us thus."

"I shall not contribute to your amusement," he replied in a melancholy voice. "I am out of spirits this evening, and cannot for the life of me shake off my despondency."

"I thought you looked extremely dull at dinner," she rejoined, "and wondered what was

the matter. But come with me. We will soon chase away your gloom."

"Grant me a few moments," he cried, detaining her. "I have something to say to you."

"What is it?" she asked, taking a seat beside him.

"You will not be surprised at my sadness when I tell you that I have come to the resolution of bidding you farewell. To-morrow I shall leave Boxgrove—not to return. You cannot be unaware of the hopeless passion that consumes me. I have made every effort to conquer it—but in vain. Nothing is left me but to withdraw from the influence of an attraction that I find irresistible. I ought to have fled long ago, but I could not tear myself away. I shall suffer ten times more from the separation, which must now take place, than I should have done at an earlier

period. I must, therefore, go while I have strength enough for the effort."

"No, Alberic," she replied. "I will not allow you to depart."

"You are very cruel. If you knew the torture I endure you would not bid me prolong it. Blissful as it is to be near you, the ever-recurring thought that I must lose you poisons my happiness, while the conviction that you will soon become the bride of another almost drives me mad."

"You must bear the torture a little longer."

"To what end?" he cried, bitterly. "There can be no hope for me. You are plighted to the marquis."

"He will give me back to my word."

"Do not think it. He is resolved to make you his bride. Except your father, all the rest of your family, including Lady Richborough, are

most anxious for the marriage. You have made a rash promise, and must perforce keep it."

"But I won't keep it!" exclaimed May, resolutely.

"Your father considers himself bound by his promise. The obligation is equally great on you."

"I will speak to the marquis to-night. I will appeal to his good feelings—to his generosity, to liberate me from a promise that was in reality extorted from me."

As she arose, two persons unexpectedly appeared before her.

The two persons were the marquis and Myrtille.

"When you have confidential matters to discuss you should not talk quite so loud," observed the marquis. "Lady Richborough and I have unwittingly heard all that has passed, and of course I am aware of the appeal you intended

to make to me. On one condition, and one only will I release you from your promise."

"What is the condition?" cried May, eagerly.

"I do not think you will consider it very hard," he rejoined, with a smile. "The condition I exact is that you bestow the hand which you have promised to me on my friend, Alberic Delacombe. You have already, it appears, given him your heart."

Nothing could equal the astonishment of his hearers.

"My dear marquis!" exclaimed Alberic, transported with delight. "This generosity——"

"Is quite unexpected, I know. But you are rather mistaken in me. I am not altogether devoid of gratitude. Remember that you laid me under an everlasting obligation by saving my life at Rome. I am now able in part to requite it."

“You have requited it a thousand fold, my dear marquis,” cried Alberic. “You have made me the happiest of men—that is, if the condition is accepted,” he added to May.

“Very little doubt about that,” said the marquis. “Still, to make sure, let us have a precise answer.”

“There is my hand,” cried May, giving it to Alberic, who pressed it to his lips.

“So the gipsy’s prophecy will be fulfilled after all,” said Myrtila. “You recollect what she told you at Ascot. But what will papa and mamma say to this sudden transfer of their daughter without consulting them? Above all, what will grandpapa say? I, too, have never been consulted, and I do not at all like losing the dear marquis.”

“You may still keep him if you choose,” said the marquis.

“Still keep him?”

"Yes. You promised to help me to a wife, and may still do so, if you are so inclined."

"Take care what you say, marquis," rejoined Myrtilla. "I might construe that pretty speech into an offer."

"It is so meant. And I here, in plain terms repeat it."

XVIII.

SEQUEL TO THE PREVIOUS CHAPTER.

By this time the elderly gentlemen, who had remained rather longer over their wine than their juniors, had come forth upon the lawn, where the assemblage was broken up into little groups. Mr. Radcliffe and Mr. Thornton were discussing some political questions with the vicar, and Colonel Delacombe was expatiating on the beauty of the evening to Mrs. Radcliffe, when the marquis and the others were seen approaching.

“The marquis looks as if he had something to

communicate," remarked the colonel. "I shouldn't wonder if the wedding-day were fixed."

"High time it should be," replied Mrs. Radcliffe. "I am quite tired of so much delay."

"Mrs. Radcliffe," said the marquis, stepping forward before the others, "I have to inform you that within the last few minutes a slight change has taken place in my arrangements with your daughter."

"A change!" exclaimed the lady. "You alarm me, marquis."

"No occasion for alarm, my dear madam," he rejoined, reassuring her with a smile. "But perhaps your husband ought to hear my communication."

"Mr. Radcliffe, your presence is required," cried the colonel.

"And mine, too, I suppose," said Mr. Thornton, whose curiosity was aroused.

"Shall I retire, marquis?" asked the colonel.

"On no account," replied the other. "You are an interested party. Mr. Radcliffe," he pursued, addressing that gentleman, who had come up with Mr. Thornton, "I will state to you in as few words as possible what I have to say. I cannot have the honour of becoming your son-in-law!"

"Oh! marquis, I did not expect this," almost screamed Mrs. Radcliffe.

"I presume, marquis, that you have some reasons for your withdrawal?" said Mr. Radcliffe, who did not look as discomposed as his wife.

"My reasons are not to be disputed," replied the marquis. "I have just discovered that your daughter entertains a preference for my friend, Alberic Delacombe, and I have therefore at once retired in his favour. You cannot oblige me more than by bestowing her hand upon him."

"My lord marquis," said Mr. Radcliffe, much moved, "I cannot sufficiently express my admiration of your conduct. It is worthy of you."

"Then you consent?" cried the marquis.

"What says Colonel Delacombe?" asked Mr. Radcliffe.

"Nothing would please me more," he rejoined. "I have long been aware of Alberic's attachment to your daughter, and discouraged it because I considered it hopeless; but now that there is no obstacle I will ask your consent, and that of Mrs. Radcliffe, to the match."

"You have mine, colonel," replied Mr. Radcliffe.

"Am I dreaming?" cried Mrs. Radcliffe.

"No, my dear madam," replied the marquis, laughing; "both you and I have been dreaming for some time, but we are perfectly awake now. Make your daughter happy."

"Must I consent?" said Mrs. Radcliffe, appealing to Mr. Thornton.

"To be sure," replied the old gentleman. "Since things have taken this turn we must all consent."

The matter being thus satisfactorily settled, the young couple came forward and received the general felicitations of the assemblage.

"What a charming scene!" observed Lady Richborough to the marquis.

"Well, you have acted admirably, marquis," said the colonel, coming up. "But though my son is the gainer, I can't help feeling sorry for you."

"Spare your pity, my dear colonel. I am not so unlucky as you suppose. I have rather gained than lost, as I am sure you will admit when I inform you that Lady Richborough has promised me her hand."

"Then, indeed, you are to be envied, marquis, and I offer you my sincere congratulations. I almost wonder that her ladyship was not your original choice."

"The fault is Myrtille's, not mine," said the marquis.

"How is the fault mine?" she asked.

"Have you not told me scores of times that you would never marry again?"

"Not since you were Marquis of Hartlepool. That makes all the difference. As a younger brother you know——"

"Precisely. I ought to have taken that into consideration. But I didn't. However, it's all right now."

Great was the astonishment of the assemblage when it was buzzed about that an engagement had just been entered into between the marquis and Lady Richborough, and a good deal of mer-

riment was excited among the young people, who hardly knew whether to treat the matter seriously or not. When convinced of the truth of the announcement, they thought that the whole thing must have been planned, and indeed it looked like it.

When Colonel Delacombe looked for his son he had disappeared. May also was gone. They had wandered together towards the most secluded part of the garden, where they could pour out their thoughts without restraint, and interchange their vows. But the boundless love that each felt for the other found but feeble and inadequate expression in words. Alberic could only tell May that he loved her better than life—that he had always loved her—and should never cease to love her, while life lasted. And with this assurance she was content.

Nothing half so sentimental passed between

the Marquis of Hartlepool and Lady Riborough. They had a long tête-à-tête, it is true, but they did not talk of love. The marquis made no protestations of undying affection, nor did he indulge in common-places of any kind which he knew very well she would not care to hear; but he spoke about his plans for autumn, for the winter, and for the spring, and quite satisfied her that it would be a very charming thing to be Marchioness of Hartlepool.

It is almost needless to say that the change that had occurred was a great disappointment to Mrs. Radcliffe and Mr. Thornton. They had looked forward to the alliance which was to reflect so much splendour upon themselves as a matter of certainty, and now that there was an end of it, their vanity underwent a severe shock. There was some slight consolation in reflecting that the marquis was not altogether lost, since Myrtille had secured him.

However, before the end of the evening the old gentleman's thoughts were turned into another channel. Almost all the company had returned to the drawing-room, where music was going on, when Mrs. Woodcot asked for a song from Jessie Brooke, who had a charming voice. The young lady, however, was still on the terrace with Oswald. Mr. Brooke called his daughter in, but when she came, she begged Mrs. Radcliffe to excuse her from singing, pleading a slight cold. Mr. Thornton had some suspicions of the truth, and they were soon confirmed by Oswald, who took him aside, and said :

“ Well, sir, I've been and done it.”

“ Been and done what ?”

“ Followed your advice, sir. You told me to propose to Jessie Brooke.”

“ I don't recollect telling you so.”

“ Yes, sir, you did. You told me she would accept me, and you were right. You added—and

I thought it extremely considerate on your part —that you would make a handsome settlement upon her, and a liberal allowance to me. If you'll be as good as your word."

"Well, I suppose I must have made the mistake, though I've quite forgotten it," replied the old gentleman, with a comical look that satisfied his grandson. "I'll go and talk the matter over with Mr. Brooke, and ascertain what he'll do."

"You are the best of granddads," cried the grateful youth.

This is the last event we have to record of that eventful evening, when an engagement was sooner broken off than two others were formed, and a third entered into immediately afterwards.

XIX.

HOW THE GIPSY'S PROPHECY WAS FULFILLED.

NEVER sure was man happier than Alberic. Fortune, that so long had frowned upon him, had now bestowed her choicest favours—had given him a name, an excellent social position, and for a bride, the loveliest and wealthiest girl in the county. Not a wish was ungratified.

And May was just as happy. We have shown that she did not care for rank and splendour, and had she been condemned to such a life would have

been wretched. Even Mrs. Radcliffe and Mr. Thornton came to this conclusion after they had got over their first disappointment, and felt that things had been much better ordered by fate than they could have ordered them.

As to Colonel Delacombe, he was almost as happy as his son. If he could have selected a wife for Alberic he would have chosen May, but he deemed the prize unattainable.

Let us here state that the marquis had no reason to regret that he had yielded to his generous impulses. With his tastes and with his mode of existence, it is perfectly clear that May would not have suited him, and would very soon have been neglected and unhappy. But Myrtille had every qualification for the brilliant part which she was called upon to play. As Marchioness of Hartlepool she speedily eclipsed all her competitors in the world of fashion, and reached the pinnacle of her ambition.

Nor has she been dethroned. No parties so splendid, so attractive, as hers. Her toilettes are perfection—her equipages the most elegant in town. Wherever she appears, the haughty marchioness dazzles all beholders. Her superb beauty excites universal admiration. Yet with all her pride she is popular, for she is good-natured, and can be condescending when she pleases. Not without reason is the marquis proud of her. Not without reason does he congratulate himself on his choice of a consort. If he has ennobled her, she has materially heightened his influence and importance.

It only remains to conduct Alberic and May to the altar. Preparations for the marriage were made as expeditiously as possible, and caused a busy time both at Boxgrove and Hazlemere. Some little delay occurred, since it was arranged that the marriage of Oswald with Jessie Brooke should take place on the same day.

At last, however, all preliminary arrangements were completed. The settlements were made and were entirely satisfactory to those principally concerned. Mr. Thornton behaved very liberally to his grandson, and settled upon the young lady, whom Oswald had chosen, a sum equal to that given her by her father.

The two marriages were celebrated, under the most auspicious circumstances, at Wootton Church—the ceremonies being performed by the vicar.

Bright sunshine gladdened the hearts of the guests collected in the precincts of the ancient fabric to witness the arrival of the wedding party. All the bridesmaids were extremely pretty, and charmingly dressed, and Jessie Brooke looked remarkably well, but an irrepressible murmur of admiration burst from the throng as May stepped from the carriage, and was led by her father towards the antique porch, along a path strewn with flowers.

How exquisitely beautiful she looked in her bridal attire! And her beauty was of a kind to produce the greatest effect upon those who pressed forward to gaze upon her. They were charmed by the sweetness of her looks, as well as by her rare loveliness. Audible wishes for her happiness in her married life accompanied her in her progress.

Amid these expressions of heartfelt interest; which could not fail to move her, she entered the sacred building, and, still led by her father, passed along the crowded aisle—crowded with kindly faces—to the altar, where a large assemblage was already collected.

A wedding in a country church is always a pretty sight, if there is any interest in the bridegroom and bride, but the double wedding we are now describing formed one of the prettiest pictures imaginable.

No handsomer couple than Alberic and May

ever knelt before the altar; and our stalwar friend Oswald and his fair young bride were also noticeable for their good looks. A bevy of lovely bridesmaids as could well be brought to gether surrounded them. Among the principal figures was Mr. Radcliffe, who stood beside his daughter, and who seemed much affected. Near him was Mrs. Radcliffe. On the other side were Mrs. Woodcot and Mr. Thornton. But by far the most striking personage in the group was Colonel Delacombe, whose tall, thin, military figure towered above those around him.

As the newly-married couples returned to the carriages that were waiting for them at the gates, amid the joyous pealing of the bells, there was quite a tumult in the churchyard. Alberic then came in for his share of admiration, and everybody declared that he was worthy of his lovely bride.

There were great festivities that day at Hazlemere. The wedding-breakfast was splendid, the long table being decorated with flowers and choicest fruit. There was the usual speech-making, by far the best speech being made by the worthy vicar.

After the repast, a couple of carriages, each having four horses, drew up near the hall-door. In the foremost Alberic and his bride set out for Tunbridge Wells, en route for Como; while the other conveyed Oswald and his bride to Dorking, whence they intended to proceed to Scotland.

After a delicious sojourn of a couple of months at Bellagio, Alberic and his wife returned to Boxgrove.

Though they had never tired of the scenery of the lovely Italian lake, they were not sorry to get back. Boxgrove had charms for them that no other place could offer, and they would not quit it

again during the ensuing winter or spring, though tempted by repeated invitations from the Marquis and Marchioness of Hartlepool.

L'Enbop.

LITTLE more has to be recorded.

The Radcliffes still reside at Hazlemere, which is kept up as well as ever. Mr. Radcliffe is not quite so active as he used to be, but otherwise in good case. Mrs. Radcliffe still describes herself as an invalid.

Mrs. Woodcot has left Boxgrove, and resides with Oswald and his wife in the neighbourhood of Chester, where grandpapa has bought them a very pretty place.


Mr. Thornton himself, who is still very hearty, and can get through a bottle of port after dinner without feeling any inconvenience from it next

morning, passes his time between Hazlemere and Boxgrove, though he sometimes pays a visit to his grandson.

Colonel Delacombe, we regret to say, is gone. He died in India, whither he had returned.

The most important change remains to be mentioned. By the influence of the Marquis of Hartlepool, and in consideration of the large landed property he has derived by his marriage, our fortunate hero has been elevated to the dignity of a baronet, and has assumed the name of the ancient family to which he belongs on his mother's side. He is now SIR ALBERIC DELACOMBE ILMINSTER, Bart., of Boxgrove.

THE END.



LONDON:
G. WHITING, BEAUFORT HOUSE, DUKK STREET, LINCOLN'S-INN-FIELD

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